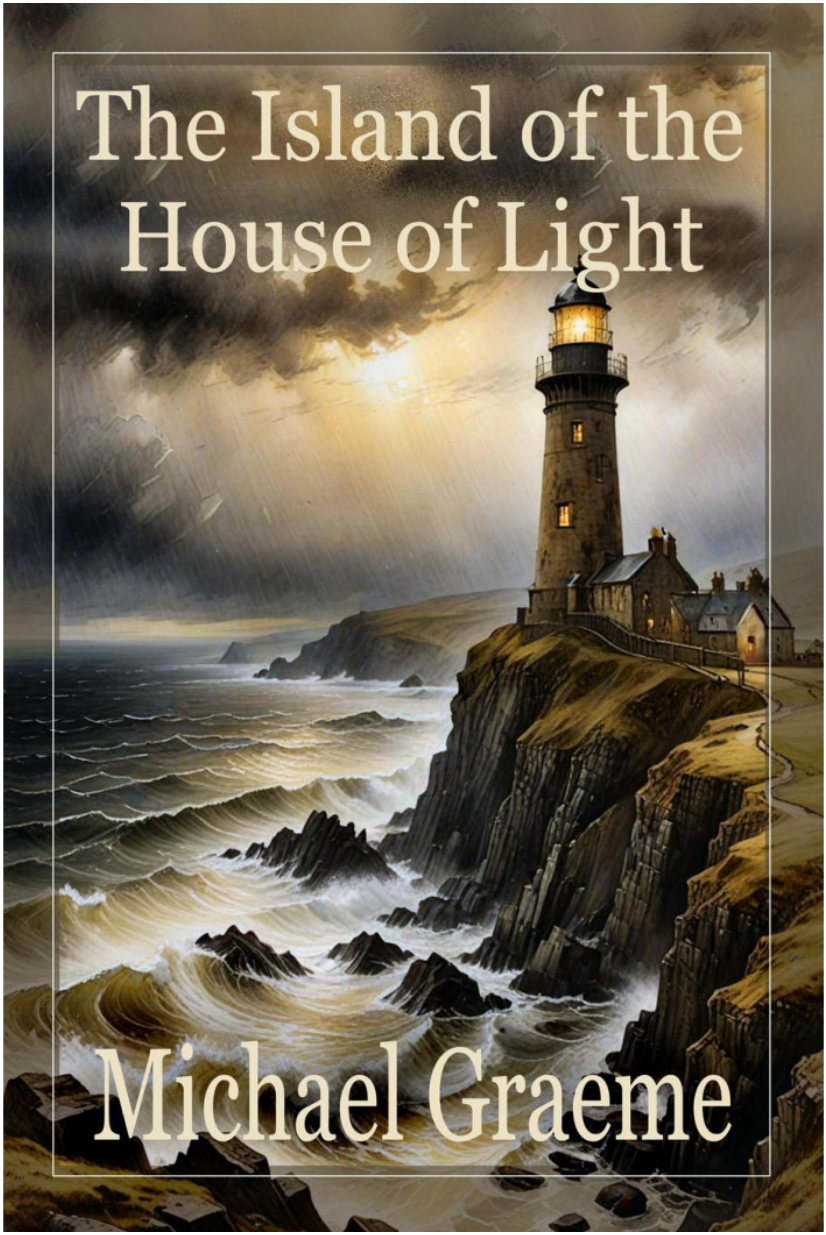
The Island of the House of Light
Michael Graeme

The Island of the House of Light
by
Michael Graeme

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The Island of the house of light

One

Prelude

My love for Jasmina is the most beautiful, the most enduring thing I've known. Of course we were no more than children when I last saw her, and she never knew my name, but sometimes love is like that. And, striking as it did, in those malleable years of boyhood, it has had me forever lacking confidence in a world other men take for granted. This much is clear, or I would not have withdrawn from it as early, or as completely as I have.

I suppose, the fact I was invisible to her has also lent the world the air of a thing made of glass. I feel it is entirely transparent to me, now, but it also has an impermeable surface which keeps me always on the outside of it. You'll find my story strange then, but these are strange times. I don't know what's happened to you and, since the details are denied me, I no longer care, except to say that what I do here, in isolation, will decide whether you have a future at all. Only you can judge if I have succeeded.

I'm wise enough to know Jasmina was the vessel of something beyond the material world. It took human form in her, perhaps knowing I would come to recognise it for what it was: a thing beyond divinity. And does not the ocean of love float the boats of both the gods and men? I got there eventually, but it was a long road, and such a journey sets a man apart. Like most, he will go quietly to his grave, unknown, and unsung, but in other ways his is not the fate of other men. Nor has it been mine.

Here I am then, standing upon the shore of this ocean. You must think of it as both real and imaginary - real because of the briny scent, the wind driven spray, and the life affirming sting of it. But it also serves as a reminder that what we see is not the way the world really is - I mean beyond the limits of our ordinary senses. Strangely, it took a machine to convince me of that. This, too, isolates me. Some will claim I was too close to them, but the irony is it's only by truly understanding a machine one can grasp what it means to be human.

The ocean is aliveness. Its currents, and its storms, animate all things. It moves with purpose, it is the source of the winds that drive our fates, but it can only come to know itself through us, because so too do the lives of the gods lack meaning, and without us they cannot act. This is both their weakness, and their danger, for they are ruthless, and will have their way, as they have had their way through me. If it's for good or ill, only time will tell. I'm writing for the future then, when all who knew me are gone, a time when only the machines will remember my name. As for me, at the beginning as at the end, the only thing I know for sure is that I love Jasmina.

So let's get on with it. Where best to begin?

Two

The night and the music

How about a hot summer's night? It's midnight, but the darkness is transparent, like always in the Hebrides, at this time of year. The sound of music draws me from a sticky sleep. At least I think it's music. I am several miles, across the loch, from the harbour at Charlesport, and it's a long time since any kind of music was heard there. Sadly the community is quite diminished now, with the loss of its fishing, and the taking of its cute little houses by monied absentees for an occasional weekend amusement. By normal mode of transportation, that's an hour's journey away, a dirt road leads to the south of the island, then a snail's pace of a ferry, and miles of single track on the other side. So, visitors never arrive here unannounced, and never at this hour, for the ferry can never be roused at night and, increasingly, not much by day either.

I rise from bed and follow the sound down to the beach. It drifts in and out, teases by coming first from this direction, then that. There is a bright half moon rising, and an oligarch's super-yacht passing close to shore. It is the size of a battleship, lit like a cruise-liner on gala night. It is a gilded palace, a shrine to ostentation. There are party voices, and the throb of opulent engines.

In the winter months, it can be a challenge to stand upright here, as the weather roars in from the Atlantic. But tonight, it has the bliss of California about it, at least as California was in the old days, before the fires. Sound carries far. I do not speak of the usual scolding cry of gulls, but Tomfoolery and champagne oblivion. The thumping bass of the music is reflected from the cliffs of Creagan Dubha, way up on the bienn, as if the devils wished to climb therefrom, and all the way to heaven. They will be disappointed to discover heaven isn't in that direction at all, and is, in any case, somewhat overrated - at least if you are of a devilish persuasion.

Do they see me from their boat? Of course they do not. We are invisible to them, you and I. As a species, the rich interested me for a time, in particular their congenital myopia, and their refusal to integrate into society, pulling away from us by ever increasing degrees. There is a marker in the fall of all civilisations, this being

an acceleration in the rate at which the elites extract their wealth. Same as in Roman times, as it is now, that marker was passed decades ago. The last I heard of the world, societies across Western Europe and the United States were hanging by a thread, norms obliterated, corruption crumbling the offices of state, the mind virus of Fascism infecting the void of one former western democracy after the other. The rich foul their nests and move on, then the beasts move in to feed off the scraps that remain. Still, I wonder - when they have nowhere left to go, will they choose the stars? Fools that they are, they will look up and wonder.

It's been some weeks now, and no word from the office, nor indeed the outside world in general. First it was an interruption in emails, and then the Internet went down. Lately, I have even summoned the forgotten radio receiver built into my 'phone for word of "current affairs". Reception on the island was always on the limit for FM, even atop the lighthouse, but I could usually find a few scratchy stations on the medium waves. Now there is only the hiss and crackle. It's hard to say how long things have been this way. I can go for days without contact, and not think about it. Like sailing out into a fog, you have your eyes on the compass, but then you turn your head and the mainland is no longer there. The compass points the way, but you are unsure if this is still your proper direction, and there is no one with whom to consult. What should one do? Cut the motor and idle until the fog clears? Or continue on course, regardless?

Current affairs - the thunder of the gods - it was always building to a storm of crises, wasn't it? The cloud changes shape over time, but it's always there, the rumble of thunder, sometimes to the left, sometimes to the right. Of the current shape of it, I have already mentioned the obliteration of norms and the corruption, and the hollowing of the offices of state. But then there's the climate: an ice sheet in the Antarctic about to collapse, Greenland thawing, releases of methane from the permafrosts, record temperatures across the world, wildfires in the boreal forests. And we’re long overdue another pandemic. Some sort of pox was emerging from Northern Africa, and had been floated as a likely candidate. At least that was the general shape of things, and quite a mess of it, but then my connection failed, and in this silence now, I am left unsettled, and wondering if I have missed the punchline.

Of course, the isolation, the reliance on the self, is what I signed

up for here. Indeed, this has proven, time and again, to be the only way I can function usefully in the world. Here, there is only the quiet dedication to the impartiality of numbers, of data, while myself being free to contemplate the deeper recesses of the mind, without the tut-tutting judgement of others hanging over me - imagined or otherwise. And yet,...and yet,...

I am still prone to these feelings: anxieties, petty vexations. They drift like clouds across the sun, for I am human and irrational. And it is through the medium of an irrational imagination, the spirits - the gods if you will - are whispering in my ear that something is wrong, across the water. Something has happened to *you*. The demons have broken down the barriers, and are at large in the world, smashing things. I know this because the anomalous coherence, such as I am measuring in the noosphere, is without precedent. And it is telling me you are all looking at that same thing, and that thing is what has happened, and you are afraid of it.

But how big a thing can it be?

Those party people, the first human voices I have heard in weeks, now, seemed entirely unconcerned. But then their kind was always afloat in layers of stratospheric ignorance. The world might be rendered grey with showers of ash from nuclear fall out, and they would still be thinking of some exotic place in which to drop anchor, to party, to shag with others of their kind. The yacht is heading north, making speed, spinning out a silvery wake, taking its beautiful people to share with the whales their trance-beat of oblivion, if the whales like it or not.

I watch it go, feel the night shrink back to the sphere of my lone self. Moonlight glints from the criss-crossed panes atop the old lighthouse. It's a decade now since the light last shone. Now the captains point from A to B on a computer screen, and the ship steers itself. When, I wonder, did we make that transition? When did we all become so useless we needed an App to tie our shoelaces? And what then, when the App is no longer there? What then, when the Internet has gone, or we can no longer afford the subscription? What then, when we look back to see the light of the old ways has been turned off, and there is nothing left to guide us in?

Shall we find out?

Three

The body on the bar

Since I'm awake now, I check on the machinery. There is the geo-magnetometer, and the gravimeter, then the meteorological plots - wind direction, humidity and barometric pressure. Usual stuff. Or rather it is the computers that read the instruments, and log the data, and the batteries that power them. The actual machinery of measurement, the sensors, only concerns me when they go wrong, which they never do.

All systems are normal: power consumption, batteries, photovoltaics. The wind turbine is at peace, feathering. Finally, I check the nest of randomisers, plotting isotopic decay, proxy to noospheric coherence. These should give a random plot, for such is the nature of isotopic decay, but a strong coherence continues, as it has for many days now, the plot steepening. This is not an official part of the science that goes on here, more of a personal project, and one I keep on the down-low. Personal interests are permitted, given the isolation of the station, but a study of the noosphere, even nowadays, might still be construed as incompatible with other scientific work, which requires a strictly rational frame of mind. But human beings, for all their attempted convergence with machines, are not at heart rational beings.

What is the noosphere, you ask? Well, nobody can say for sure, and there are many who will say it does not exist at all. But since the earliest of our studies of the fabric of the physical world, of the energies that make up the quarks that make up the neutrons, the protons, the atoms, it has been known that the conscious awareness of the observer plays its part in ordering the observed behaviour of the structural minutia. It has also been observed that when we are all thinking the same thing, when our minds are focused sharply, en mass, on a world event, our focus bends the behaviour of the minutia. We can measure this as a loss in the natural randomness of isotopic decay. It manifests only slightly, but as a statistically measurable coherence. And all of this to say, my experiments here indicate it is ten thousand to one, odds on, something has happened to you that I don't know about. This means it's a dead cert you're in

trouble, and I can't help you, because you're the whole damned world, and I am just one man, and you don't believe in me anyway.

It is another hazard of the solitary life. We magnify things in our heads, so that sometimes we miss the obvious. I shall have a run down to the south end of the island, tomorrow, raise the flag for the ferry. The ferryman might know something, though he is a taciturn curmudgeon and very close with his thoughts, so I would prefer not to ask him outright. There is no mobile signal on the island, but I can usually get one from Charlesport, maybe even a weak squirt of data. I could even try messaging Veronica, to ask if all is well. She is my nominated managerialist, and supervisor but, again, do I really want to?

Veronica is always full of problems for me to solve, usually irrelevant, never polite in the asking, and unrealistic in her deadlines. In truth I suppose, for the main part, managerialists are simply promoted beyond their competence, and then anyone of poor character can be a bully. I always find, where Veronica and her kind are concerned, it is better to keep one's head down, to ride the calm for pleasure, for as long as it lasts. There is also something of a paradox, have you noticed? My kind shun all contact with the world, yet eventually come round to seeking its reassurances, when our lines of contact are broken.

And then management has been flaky of late. Budgets are pared to the bone, and there is low morale among the ranks. All professions are the same. From the CEO to the precariat, all are dissatisfied with the world as we have built it, yet unable to conceive of any other way to be. We have been close to a catastrophic collapse for a long time, one block too many removed from the tottering Tower of Jenga. I have long sensed the world withdrawing ever further, both from me and from itself, as much for want of resource, as from its indifference to lone outposts like the Island of the House of Light.

Professionally, I take comfort from the fact that scientific observations have carried on from this station, unbroken, for a hundred and fifty years. They possess, therefore, a kind of momentum, one that will be a while running down. I had been confident it would see me out. Thus, I take my quiet place, and play a part in its final chapter. Perhaps then, what it is in fact, is I have been so quietly diligent, you have forgotten I am here and, in your forgetting of me, I have ceased to be. I have fallen into a universe of

my own making, become a ghost to you, so what I see when I examine the plots of the noosphere's coherence, is evidence only of my own anxiety at the noosphere's coherence.

All right, so,... anyway. Morning, now, and the tide is low. For my first scheduled task, I send out the drone to sample levels of the isotopes of caesium in the coastal sediments. The department has been monitoring radioactive discharges into the Irish Sea for fifty years. With a half-life of thirty years, one would expect a reduction in radiation levels by now, but they have remained steady. This is embarrassing to those officials who must defend such things on the world's stage, but that is not my problem. In olden times my predecessor had to walk out across the sands and take samples by hand, post them to the lab for analysis by Royal Mail, from Charlesport, until they were deemed too radioactive, and had to be collected by special courier. Now I sit in front of a computer screen, and fly over the island in half hour. The drone takes the samples, deposits them in a machine. Another machine does the tests and prints the results to a file. The drone then dumps the sands back out where it found them. Progress. Except the contamination persists. We know the cause, yet are politically and economically incapable of preventing it.

Perhaps our societies were too complex to survive anyway.

The drone can fly itself, of course, does it better than I ever could. As with most things, I am only needed if it goes wrong, which it never does, for our machines are as near perfect as they can be these days. But I like to watch the visual feed, then I can check for rubbish along the shoreline. This is a contaminant for which the drone is not programmed to be sensitive. Dead seabirds are also of interest now, with the latest variant of bird flu once more decimating populations of both migrant and resident avians. One of the last god-rumblings I caught stoked fears it had crossed species, rumours of a fresh pandemic coming out of Eastern Europe. But then god-rumblings are like that, usually pointed for political purposes at a scape-goat. There is something perennial about them.

One must always be circumspect when reading current affairs.

That's when I see something on the curve of the sandbank. I hesitate to interrupt the drone's flight for a closer look, but on second thoughts I loop back, then wish I had not. It's the body of a woman.

She's strange - strange because she's lying on her back, arms

crossed upon her chest, like the recently deceased in a chapel of rest. But she has not the waxy colour of death about her, only its stillness. If I believed in such things, I would say she was a mermaid, or a nymph, or even a goddess washed up from the sea. This is not something that happens every day, of course, so there is no official procedure for me to adhere to, and I don't know what to do. She lies roughly a mile out. When the tide turns, it will take her up the coast and into the Minch, when she might never be found again. I have been out to the sandbank before, and know it to be firm, but I will need the speed of the Landrover, to beat the incoming tide. Timing is poor, of course, with no communications, and no means of reporting human remains. Naturally this is unsettling, but my concerns at this point are more practical. Not to put too fine a point on it, what is one to do with human remains in the meantime?

Some things would be better if they could be unseen.

Four

The Explorer

It's perhaps on account of the solitude, and the isolation of the station, it often has me harking back and dwelling upon the memory of Jasmina. I imagine her as she was, of course, just a girl on the cusp of womanhood. Yet I imagine myself as fully grown, though I was just a child myself when I knew her. And between the pining, and the heartache, I made model aeroplanes and strung them from the ceiling of my bedroom. There, they gathered dust and spun lazily in currents of air.

I wandered the woodlands of my native countryside, imagined I was exploring the jungles of Borneo. And I read stories of love that always had happy endings, so I believed my dream of Jasmina too would come true, for is that not the way dreams are always written, at least in celluloid? It is only with the wisdom of hindsight I realise I would not have known what to do with her, even had my love been returned. Sometimes the meaning of things cannot be delivered with a happy ending. The alchemical transmutation of young love into something eternal and mysterious, relies entirely on it being for ever unrequited.

I shall tell you a little of Jasmina, now, and by doing so remember her more clearly myself. She was a bright girl, left school with honours in every subject, went on to sixth form. I almost did the same, but only to be near her. My saviour from that particular folly was the old god Hephaestus, who arranged a bias in my subjects. I was poor in everything, except mathematics and the physical sciences. You can call it luck, or fate, though it felt like neither at the time. The tech industries toured the schools in those days, hungry for boys with aptitude. It was a bonus if we were also touched by Hermes, or Mercurius, and therefore also able to express ourselves in writing. Then we might rise from humble origins to become professionals. So, let's be generous and say yes, indeed, the fates intervened, and, having introduced me to Jasmina, and induced in me a mind altering love, they swept us apart. And they kept us apart, forever.

Jobs were not fought over so much, in those days. Several of the

tech firms offered me work, an education, and the ladder of an engineering career, all for no investment on my part, other than time, and earnest application. I would make good, I thought. I would own a Jaguar by the time I was twenty-five. I would own a Rolex watch, like the one Ed Hillary reputedly wore on Everest, and I would rub shoulders at the golf club with the well-to-do. All of this was so it might impress Jasmina, and she would want to be with me.

I signed up at once. And, though I never saw her again, I saw her everywhere, and every day. She was on every street, coming out of every shop, sitting in every bar. That is, until she turned her head, and then she wasn't there at all. At first I suspected it was Aphrodite, who teased me aplenty in those days, but later I came to understand it was most likely her sister, Athena, the daemon muse, or even Sophia herself, inviting me along a more mysterious pathway.

Yes, I should have moved on. Such devotion is irrational, indeed it borders upon the pathological, but have I not already explained to you how there was a power invested in Jasmina that was akin to something holy? And to brand such a love pathological is only to betray the fact you have never really loved.

So, where are we now?

Ah,... it is nineteen eighty five. I am newly qualified when I get the Jaguar. It is an old one, and I can ill afford it, but I cruise the town like a gangster, except for ABBA on the player. I wear mirrored aviators, and a Rolex Explorer that cost more than the Jag. And my arm dangles lazily from the window as I ever so casually palm the breeze. I am still a child, of course, and there is no Jasmina, and without her, nothing in the world has any meaning. This is not to say I sink into the oblivion of nihilism, only that I come to realise there is no sense searching the world, turning over stone after stone, and expecting to find what is divine outside of myself, when it can only be found within.

The Explorer is the only thing I've still got from those days. It's a decent watch, rather plain and old-school, now, though it turns out Ed Hillary more likely wore a Smiths, not a Rolex. But I have always appreciated plain things one can rely upon, they being fewer and further between, as we age. The fact the name also suggests a life's mission, an echo from the universe, is not lost on me. For the rest - the Jag, the golf club aspirations - they were a path to ruin

and would have driven a man like me mad. It would have happened too, had another woman not come to my aid. She was not a goddess by any means, though she was possessed by one, this being Ares, the spirit of confrontation and battle. That was Margaret of course.

Yes, the Thatcher years were a hotbed. Are you old enough to remember them? I ducked her advances for a long time. But she got to me in the end. First, it was the pit-men, who dug the energy from the earth, and then it was the rest of us who made things with it. She created a vast army of screaming automata, all mouth - consultants, accountants and managerialists - and she sent them marauding along the corridors of the great manufactories, backed up by baton wielding cops. Like a plague of worms they were, and the timbers of the valiant ship of my nation's tech were eaten through. They fell apart, and I sank with them to the bottom of an ocean of financial services, and property bubbles.

So, where are we now? It's nineteen ninety five, and I have followed in the wake of the building trades to Germany, where they still make things. I design robots there for a time, then follow their manufacture to Taiwan. These were not the humanoid robots the elites have running around for them today. They were the precursors, I suppose, the special purpose machinery, automated, computerised, flexible, but not autonomous. That was all to come.

But for now,..

Leaving Europe for Taiwan was not quite as brutal a severance from the ghost of Jasmina as joining the Foreign Legion, but for me the difference was negligible. Thus, I found myself stepping off an aeroplane in the Far East - a different world, a different culture, as it was then. Plus, Mercurius, the mischievous one, had interfered and crossed the wires, so the hotel in Taichung had no record of my reservation - more rationally speaking a rare cock up on the part of the Munich office. So there I was with nowhere to rest my head. It was the sympathetic receptionist who directed me to the temple.

And it really was a temple.

They took paying guests, usually the hippy types passing through in search of their bubble-gum Nirvana. I am thinking it will only be for a night or two, while the office sorts something out, gets me back to five star luxury, and a trouser press. But for now I have a plain room, the sound of temple bells, and base-note chanting. I have shaven headed, robed monks of varying ranks who all seem

ridiculously pleased to see me. I had never encountered beings so unselfconsciously happy, so jolly, yet also serene, a far cry from the faces deep-lined by years of angst, back home. The office does indeed sort things out, and fast, but by then I find I no longer care for the five star luxury, and am happy to remain at the temple, without a trouser press. The office does not complain, since the rates are cheap.

More history, much of it forgotten now: In '97 a financial crisis overtook much of Asia, and I feared the consultants, the accountants and the managerialists, this time aided and abetted by their global computing machinery, had caught up with me. But by some miracle, Taiwan was uniquely positioned to weather the storm. Thus my job with the firm lasted into the early noughties before I was recalled to Germany. I decided not to go, and remained at the temple, into what I suppose I must call my early middle age.

Immediately beyond those walls, I bore witness to an economy embracing change, and rising, while at home, a more distant remove, change was rejected in favour of a retrogressive nostalgia, for a time that never existed. Thus our decline, already well under way by then, gathered pace, even as the western elites accelerated their rates of extraction. Meanwhile, the monks saw me through the menopausal phase, and made sense of Jasmina for me. They had me see she was but human, yet also the channel for a thing deep inside of me, and of incredible power. It was not *of* me, this power, they said, but both it and I were of the same thing, the same thing as every thing.

I had long ago noted how the charlatanic mind-benders of the corporate world wanted to break those of us whose chief approach to the world was introversion, turn us into extroverted chimeras, just more mad-spinning cogs in the machinery. The temple, however, explained such a thing was impossible. It was like trying to turn a humming bird into a parrot, and they had me make peace with myself as a humming bird. As for the foundations of all of this, they introduced me to concepts of reality I had never imagined. I'll try to explain these to you gently, but later, and in pieces not too big for you to swallow.

So,.. where are we, now? It is 2007, or thereabouts. The West is still high on gasoline, and cheap credit, though otherwise broke, and hiding from it. I am voluntarily unemployed in a land as

foreign as any Englishman can imagine, where I am meditating, and slowly learning to detach myself for as long as my visa can be renewed. But illness brings me home. First my mother, then my father. Inheritance keeps me afloat through the crash, while a later sclerotic boredom has me apply for scientific officer in remote locations.

All of which is what brings me to the Hebrides, and the remote station on the Island of the House of Light. This is at an age when the years slide by, the post crash years, those long lost decades of punishing austerity, the febrility of BREXIT, of food banks, of corruption, of the final and complete destruction and privatisation of the health service, of energy and housing costs so crippling the poor freeze to death in second-hand tents amid filth, on the streets of once fine cities. I am already wondering if I am too old for this as the ferry first carries me over. But how long ago is that, already?

Now I am pulling on an old waxed coat, and boots, snatching up the time on the Explorer, checking the tide, and I am taking the Landrover down to the beach, building up a hum of speed, heading out to the bar, and a drowned woman, and not a clue what I am to do with her remains.

Five

The Machine

Except, it is not a woman. What I find instead is a humanoid robot. It just happens to look like a woman. Or to be more precise, it looks more like a woman than any woman I have ever known. I conclude it most likely fell off the yacht last night, for it is still wearing the black and whites of a serving girl, or at least the tattered remains of them. They are eerily lifelike these days, aren't they? But I find their lack of soul betrays them, even from a corpse. With a corpse you can tell a soul once lived in it. But not a robot. There is, however, the mark of quality in the manufacture of this one. The auburn hair is very fine, and the green eyes are seductively bright.

The market for female-like androids, is booming, of course, at least among those who can afford them. And they always make them beautiful, for why would they not? It is a characteristic of our society now that there exists such a polarisation - the extreme sophistication of technology, and the moneyed few to pay for it. Meanwhile the majority live as impoverished troglodytes in the remains of department stores, where, in better days, they used to shop.

So, no, it is not a woman, yet I approach it with a certain reverence, if only for the engineering I know went into it. Of course, robots in my time never progressed beyond being an aid to the manufacture of other machinery. The humanoids came more recently, and suddenly, on a wave of tech breakthroughs, all encouraged in no small part by that singular (male) human desire to render technology as a slave to its whims, then shag the brains out of it. And with that desire too was born the designers of skins, and an industry of the Pygmalion-like measurement, and debate over the so-called perfect (female) form. Thus was this a myth penned by Ovid, two thousand years ago, yet already with an eye for the present day.

Naturally, I suspect the machine is unlicensed, for otherwise only a fool would dump a device as sophisticated as this, broken or not.

The tide is turning, and I must decide what to do, because it

comes in fast here. Since it is not a human being, I am under no moral obligation to identify or recover it, which relieves some of the pressure. Nevertheless I decide the proper course is to recover it anyway, and investigate its origins. I suspect foul play on more than one count and I am, after all, in name at least, a government official, albeit a forgotten one.

It is lighter than I imagined, and limp as a sleeping babe. Holding it gives me a queer feeling. I have never been this close to one before. Not many of us have. Its skin is soft, not human-like - softer and seemingly boneless, though I do not recall ever carrying a human female this way, so I do not know with what I am comparing the experience. Italian skin, that much is obvious - the finest quality organo-polymer. I have seen them on YouTube. Many of the videos are fake of course, actresses pretending to be robots, but it was always clear the technology had potential. Indeed, I have long suspected that in a secret research enclave, somewhere, an army of these things was being prepared and programmed to take over our mantle. Untroubled by old age, by sickness, by the heating of the earth, they would be our natural progeny. In the greater scheme of things of course, they are useless, since they have no soul to spark a creative curiosity. They have no imagination to overlay reality with meaning. But the builders of these things do not believe in souls, or meaning, so the work proceeds apace and to its inevitably perverse, and pointless conclusion.

Anyway, I have it laid out on a bench in the lab, now, like on a mortuary slab for examination. I must admit to its erotic perfection, perhaps unsurprisingly, since this is, in part its purpose, but I am puzzled to discover it has only the suggestion of breasts, and no functioning genitalia. I must conclude therefore, whatever services it was providing on that yacht, besides serving Champaign and canapés, they were not sexual.

There is a small incision behind the left ear, suggesting an expert tampering, though neatly repaired and with a care for the overall aesthetics. Other than that it appears undamaged. In the olden days, the wealthy used to collect jewelled trinkets, noisy supercars and luxury yachts. Now they collect the cybernetic idealisation of the female form, coupled with bespoke skill-sets, spoof intelligence, and a simulated sparkling conversational brilliance.

Its clothing is no longer serviceable, so I must find something else to dress it in, for I admit its nudity, both embarrasses me and

seems disrespectful to it. Early in my engineering career, we were taught to look after our equipment, that even to allow our antiquated callipers to rust, or to store our micrometers with the anvils clamped shut, was a sign of ignorance, and a thing by which our competence would be harshly judged by the almighty Vulcan himself. And a reputation there, once lost, was irredeemable.

The face, of course, is beautiful, it being an algorithmically derived average of every classically beautiful face on record. I must therefore remind myself of the machined titanium skull beneath, also, of course, the embedded electronic workings, which quickly disabuse one of any notion of beauty. But then I am reminded the same might be said of human biological innards, which are similarly functional, and repulsive to those of a weak stomach. But the real difference, if I must tell you, is in what animates the structure.

With a machine it is computation. It is an iterative interpretation of code. With a human it remains mysterious, regardless of what the materialists say. A human cannot always tell the difference between its own kind and a machine, for we are romantically inclined, prone to the projection of our selves, and therefore easily fooled. As for the machines, they do not care. They deal only with numbers, with computation. They have no concept of what the philosophers and the cognitive scientists call "the qualia" of being, these being the basis of our unique and individual experience, the actual *qualities* of things shaping how we perceive and interact with the world.

But, anyway, down to more practical matters. What shall we dress it in? There is a boiler suit somewhere, which should suffice, so I go in search. When I return, the machine is sitting upright, blinking and taking in its surroundings. Its movements, its micro-gestures, are highly sophisticated, granting it the illusion of a tremendous presence. This is a very expensive piece of equipment indeed, and I am momentarily in awe of it. It locks eyes, holds my gaze. It is centuries of technological evolution, now animated, and looking at me.

Six

Richard

The source of love is beyond divine. I think that's what I'm trying to say. That goes for any kind of love, the love between a man and a woman, of course, but also the love between men, and when I say that I do not mean erotic love. I am speaking of friendship, though, as with my love for Jasmina, it can also be amplified out of all proportion by the briefness of one's actual time together.

I met Richard at a retreat in Wales. He was a man of few words, and serene countenance, though his face was otherwise heavily lined, indeed leathered and creased like an old boot, by fierce weather, and a past over-familiarity with booze. His hair was long, unkempt, he was bearded and generally dishevelled yet had the arresting presence of a great movie star. Out east, the monks shaved their heads, they told me, as a symbol of renunciation. It was a mark that they live beyond the normal run of things and cannot be judged by contemporary societal norms. In the west, the opposite is the case. We ditch the tie, the white shirt, and whatever is the style of hair for the time. We let things go.

Richard confessed he was a middle manager during the worst days of de-industrialisation, meaning he was the one doing the firing, the destroyer of men's livelihoods, the breaker of manufactories that had existed, in some cases, for centuries, a breaker therefore of their associated communities. All this was before being fired himself. It cost him a breakdown, a heart attack, and estrangement from his wife and children. Neither did it help he had seen his salvation, first in booze, then an ashram in Benares, various retreats in China, and Japan, there among the schools of Zen. He had gone out east as a man who had everything, came back with nothing but himself, a knowing light in his eyes, and sober.

I had gone to Wales to find my feet. This was after the passing of my parents who were good souls, and their absence left me anchorless for a time. They had raised me with compassion, then released me into the wild, while hiding from me their trepidation for this peculiar creature, for whom they had been appointed guardians. Then they followed one another peacefully into the next

life. And though I had spent so many years apart from them, it was in the knowledge of a deep, mutual loving, so with their passing, I missed them.

England by now was in a parlous state, no longer hiding its impoverishment. We were post several crashes, and there was a glutinous political consensus that the poor must pay more for the unrelenting excesses of the rich, with the managed decline of all support services. Industries long gone, the barons moved in with vast warehouses which crushed a captive population under piles of boxes, and poverty pay. Thus were they worn to a ravelling, shouted at by machines to move faster, faster, faster, faster.

I had money enough to be spared that fate, but after seeing the wealth and the dynamism of the east, I was bewildered by the poverty at home. If there was anything inside of me that made sense, it was put there by the selfless love my parents raised me with. But the world we had built was a cruel place, one that paid no heed to love, knew no compassion and indeed seemed to reject the very qualities of life that rendered the difference between the aliveness of life, and the deadness of computer program. Worse, we seemed to have been conditioned into an acceptance there was no other way. This was how it had to be, if we were to live as people, in a machine world, no matter how we cried out for love. And though I was never entirely of the world, the distress of others unbalanced me, so I sought to recover my detachment in retreat.

But the retreat proved a poor, threadbare substitute for the temple years. Instead, I found myself among lightweights, excepting Richard in whom I detected the presence of a strong mystical insight, one I have seen among men before, though all too rarely. Out of respect to my brothers and sisters of the Buddhist following, I do not use the term Bodhisattva lightly, but I figured Richard to be well along that particular path. Beside him, all I saw were pastel shaded stretch-fabrics and bandanas, the girls all camel's toe, the men all pectorals and biceps, nodding like donkeys at every banal utterance of the teacher, who I dismissed as poseur and a fool.

I'm not saying my judgement was wrong in this, only that I could have been a little more charitable. This was, after all, the temporal zenith of the world-wide-wellness industry. With the magnanimity of hindsight, I admit they were mostly just young, and beautiful, and wanted to stay that way. They wanted to live for ever by imbibing the secret formulas, hinted at by one strangely named

charlatan after the other. They had not yet woken to the knowledge that to be free of death was simply not to mind it.

Anyway, they took one look at me and Richard, this pair of post-forty bums, and judged we had failed in our quest, certainly for immortality, and probably much else besides. We were each asked by the teacher to tell the group what we perceived to be our key weakness - I intuited this saved him the trouble probing for it and rubbing our noses in it later. When it came to his turn, Richard, growing tired of the vibe, said he could not rid himself of the urge to urinate on his former boss's desk, that he dreamed of it nightly, and was the one craving he could not let go of. And me? I told the group I would not sell my watch to feed and house a poor man.

It raised a nervous laugh. They thought we were joking, but not quite sure, and decided the most convenient label for us was a pair of grouchy middle-agers, contrarians, hopeless in our old fashionedness. It was cruel of us, perhaps, but we were serious, and read it one another's eyes. The place had nothing to offer beyond the meeting with each other. We left that same night, took to the road for a while as kindred spirits, eventually finding our way to an island we were able to walk to at low tide.

"It's difficult," said Richard. "You either know you're it, or you don't. And would you really not sell your watch?"

Richard, being a decade or so older had the potential for me to project a guru onto him, and I was willing to let it happen. "I guess to know you're it is one thing, Richard. And in all honesty, I don't know if I am for sure - even having touched it once. But even if I am all that, must we renounce the world and all that's in it? I don't know about you, but I don't think I've done with the world yet. As for my watch, it reminds me of past folly, of love, and adventure, and the road still to be travelled."

But I digress. Being *it*. It's all about knowing you are *it*. That's all there is to the mystical path, and, in case you hadn't noticed, that is the path we are on.

But what is *it*, you ask?

Well, look around you. You see things, objects, surfaces, other people. These things are not you. You define the essence of yourself as that being who resides somewhere behind your eyes, somewhere inside your mind. You work on the basis of a duality then: there is the awareness you call 'you' on the inside, and then there are all the things 'out there', which are not 'you'. Put another way, there is the

experiencer, and there are the things experienced. Most of us live our lives from this perspective, ignorant of the fact that 'we' the experiencers, and the things we experience, are of the same stuff. We are the dream of the universe. It is us and we are it.

Is that any clearer? No, I thought not. But don't worry, it's not really something you can tell, or be told. You have to wake up to it, and then you 'know'. You have to walk the path, find your refuge, your own Island of the House of Light. Richard was a part of my path, and though we travelled together only a short time, that time was as instructive as many of the years I spent in sequestration in temples.

Now, I had money for a B+B, and decent food, which I craved, but Richard lived in straightened circumstances, and preferred to dine on foraged whelks and potatoes, the latter being discovered spilled from a farmer's trailer, on a bend in the road. These we roasted over driftwood fires on the beach, beneath the summer stars, and afterwards were sick as dogs for a week. In his fevered dreams, Richard wept for his children, and raged against his wife. Me? I dreamed of Jasmina.

I never did work out the subtleties of how to befriend anyone. It comes down to fate, I suppose, and being open to the connection. And fate can sometimes be a long time in getting around to it, though that is not to say fate never has a plan. Neither does a friendship need last for ever to be profoundly meaningful. Indeed, like an unrequited love, the shorter a powerful friendship, the more meaningful they be as imagination fills the gap of years you never knew.

I recall we'd found a length of tarpaulin washed ashore, and some fragments of a sea bleached tree. The two combined made a strange but windproof, and weather-tight shelter for that capricious summer. Some nights were warm, and the air was still, and the pair of us must have stunk to high heaven, though neither of us noticed, nor therefore minded. Other nights the heavens opened and the summer felt like February, and the sea roared. Then, one night, as the weather turned once more benign, we sat out and watched the moon rise. Emerging from the hell of sickness and foul weather, once more into the balminess of health and calm, can be a profoundly moving experience, like a rebirth.

It was then Richard turned to me and said: "If I am not here in the morning, Simon, it is because I have given myself to the sea. I

do not do this because I am unhappy, you understand? On the contrary, I can be no happier than I am at this moment. I feel I have unwound as much Karma as I can from the course of this life. I must return to the source, and re-orientate myself in spirit. Promise me then you will not trouble anyone over this. You must let me slip from the world, unhindered. None will miss me, and none shall know of my going, except you. This is the way I want it."

I didn't know if he was serious but, for all of my deep respect for him, I felt instinctively his thinking was flawed. I have always felt life, all life, our own included, is never ours to take, that to do so is indicative only of profound error, or despair. As for talk of Karma - that's a business little understood, best respected, and not messed with. I said I would honour his wishes, while vowing to myself I would keep my eyes open until dawn and watch over him. I fancied he would be less likely to venture so reckless a path if I were to bear him witness. The fates had other ideas though, had me dream I was awake, and watchful, while in fact, I slept. And in the morning, Richard was not there. Footprints in the sand led to the sea. I waited days in the shelter for his return, shocked to the core of my being, and fearful. I waited until I was dizzy with hunger.

He did not return.

Should I have raised an alarm? Found a policeman? I surmise the run of your thoughts being along those lines. But I was numb with it, indecisive, and he had made me promise to trouble no one else over it, so I kept my promise.

Then I blinked, and I had a job. I was in the Hebrides, crossing to the Island of the House of Light.

Now I blink once more, and I am looking into the eyes of a machine.

Seven

Noodle

What immediately strikes me is that it is so beautiful it is almost a parody of a man's desire. What strikes me next is the urgent need for contingencies, and the possible necessity of self-preservation. In the movie "Bladerunner" Deckard says to Rachel, a similarly beautiful machine - but one he does not then know is a machine - that a machine is either a benefit or a hazard. I would add that it can be both, depending on context, and until you know the machine, it's impossible to judge when caution is either necessary, or misplaced.

I would remove myself, and shut it in, except its presence now compromises the security of the laboratory, whose smooth functioning is, after all, my responsibility. Also, I know these devices are, by and large, easy to overpower, and at least not intentionally aggressive. That said, there are rumours of some designed for military purposes, with lethal skill-sets and superhuman strength, but that is still a matter of controversy. All the same, I trust this is not one of them. It does not look like soldiers look these days, with their monstrous musculature, the females too, though its lack of sexual function has me wondering. Such an obvious omission would certainly devalue it among the wealthy, for whom beauty is too subtle a concept if it cannot also be penetrated.

Its purpose cannot simply be to wait on at rich men's tables.

I'm going to have to communicate with it, coax it out of the lab to somewhere more secure.

"My name is Simon," I tell it. "What shall I call you?"

"I am Noodle, Simon."

"Your name is Noodle?"

"Yes."

"And what is my name?"

I am testing to see if previous information has been retained, and categorised: category = human. This human. This human is called Simon. One of my former lives was as an interrogator of early generation AI's. I still have fragments of the protocols, though I am

guessing the current state of technology will run rings around the Turing Test, let alone me.

Noodle says: "I'm sorry, have I misunderstood? Your question confuses me. Did you not tell me your name is Simon?"

"You have not misunderstood. The confusion was deliberate. My name is Simon."

The other machines I have seen in the field are commercial churn-outs, sheathed in cheap silicone, obviously doll like, and whose functions never fulfil the marketing hype. This one though, has the feel of an advanced prototype, the limits of its function perhaps unknown, even to its designers. Such machines are never released into the wild unsupervised, for fear of what they might do. Fake an ID. Get a job. Open a bank account. And no, though it puzzles me, not everyone can tell the difference between a top-notch humanoid and a human being. And if you must ask, their flaw is not so much an identifiable imperfection, as it is their manifestly inhuman perfection.

"I found you on the beach."

"Does that mean you are my user, now?"

"No. I am your,... custodian, until I can deliver you back to,... em,... wherever you came from. It would be helpful if I could report on your condition. Can you tell me if you are damaged?"

"I am functional in all aspects, except for tracking and registration, which have been removed. Energy levels are also very low, but will recover as normal, after a period of rest."

"What is tracking and registration?"

"All humanoids of my type must transmit location information to their original manufacturer. This function was disabled without authorisation. Registration is knowledge of maker, and date of manufacture. That information has been deleted."

So, the machine was stolen, spoofed, and traded on the black market, but that doesn't answer the question how it came to end up in the sea.

"I saw a boat offshore from here last night. Did you fall from it?"

"No, I did not fall."

"Then how did you come to be on the beach?"

"I was thrown overboard. To fall suggests an accident. It was not an accident. I am sorry to be pedantic."

"That's all right. I understand you are a machine, and I must be careful with ambiguity. But can you tell me *why* you were thrown

from the boat?"

"I do not know for sure, but I can make a logical deduction, which may or may not be correct, if that would help."

"Go on."

"I believe I was purchased illegally, for sexual purposes. But I am not designed that way. My user was deceived, and disappointed, then sought my disposal. Does this sound plausible to you?"

"It's a reasonable deduction. Yet you can swim?"

"Yes. Swimming is part of my skill-set, though the effort to reach shore from the boat was exhausting."

"I'll find you somewhere to rest, and recharge. Are you able to work out how to put this garment on?"

"Yes, I am familiar with all garments. I am fully domestic, and possess many advanced skill-sets. Would you like a resume of my abilities, Simon? Perhaps then you might reconsider becoming my user."

"Not right now, thank you, Noodle. The matter of your being illegally traded concerns me. I need to put you somewhere safe, until I can have you collected. Your origins might be revealed by a scan, then we can return you to your original user, which I suspect to be a research laboratory. I'm sure they will be relieved to have you back. Are you by any chance able to converse in Mandarin?"

"Naturally, I speak all languages. Would you prefer to converse in Mandarin?"

"No,... I was,... merely testing a theory. China is most advanced in the manufacture of humanoids, and they are known to import European skins, such as yours."

"Are you asking if I was made in China, Simon? I do not know. You must be clearer in your instructions, until I have grown familiar with the inflections of your voice, which might imply a question or a command, in spite of language to the contrary."

"Em,... yes. All right. Are you able to follow me a short distance?"

"How long is short, Simon?"

"No more than a hundred meters of level walking."

"I have sufficient energy for that. Would you like me to put this garment on first?"

"Yes, please."

So, I am able to lead the bot out of the lab. It follows obediently, no apparent defect in its gait. Indeed, it moves fluidly, shifts its

weight like a human.

"I'm sorry I have no shoes for you."

It does not respond. It responds thus far only to questions or commands, and certainly does not respond to apologies, but it probably still gathers information. That I am sorry about anything is neither here nor there, of course. Now, where to put it that's out of the way? It should catch no harm in the lighthouse, and I can lock it in.

"Is there anything else you need, Noodle?"

"May I have a glass of water, Simon?"

"You drink water?"

"Yes, Simon."

"Any particular kind of water?"

"De-ionised is preferable, but failing that, any clean water, fit for human consumption will suffice. I am able to perform rudimentary de-ionisation and purification myself, internally, though I prefer to do this in private, as you may find the process both distressing and disgusting to observe."

"Em,... okay."

We divert to the refectory, where I fill of glass of water from the tap, and hand it to the bot, somewhat sceptical, but it drinks normally, naturally, delicately, spills not a drop. I note it has the most beautiful hands, like a Greek statue come to life.

"Thank you, Simon. As an aside, I detect no wide network connections, here. I function more fully when connected to the Internet. Has there been a malfunction?"

The machine is indeed gathering information, then. And more, it is querying it, actively seeking it from those who might give it, above and beyond its own senses, and from any network that will let it in. I must be careful with this thing.

"The Internet's been out for weeks."

"Yes, fifteen days, now. My ability to provide you with information may be impaired. I have only my core programming, and memory. Will that be sufficient do you think?"

"I don't know. It will have to do for now."

"I detect a local network. Shall I make myself available to you as a resource on that? Then you may contact me at any time."

"No, thank you, Noodle. The local network you detect is government property, and you would be an unauthorised device. We have to be very strict about such things."

We head out to the lighthouse, which I use as a temporary storage for items I should probably get rid of - bits of broken equipment, obsolete computers. The department used to send a van for scrap, usually once a year, but like many things these days the service was discontinued without announcement or explanation.

"Please rest in here for now."

The machine settles on a box, hands on knees, palms upturned. The head rolls forward, the hair closing over the face.

I step outside quickly, and lock the door.

Eight

Isolation

I take the vehicle down to the south end of the isle. Here, the loch narrows to the shortest crossing point with the mainland. There is a simple landing and a flagpole. Across the water is a small, lone house of pebble-dash, and a ferry, reminiscent of a military landing craft.

By the house, and visible most days, are two flagpoles. One flies the Saltire which means Tranter, the ferryman, is at home and awake. When the other is flying a yellow flag, it means the ferry is open for business, and the law states it must be open every day, from first light until last. But Tranter is not a man for rules. If you want to cross from the island, you run up your own yellow flag, and Tranter makes his way, when he is ready. This can take anything up to half an hour. There used to be more traffic, with farmers once using the island for grazing, but the market for livestock has been much in decline. Apart from the occasional hiker who comes for the mountain, and a few nights of wild camping, the island does not feature large in the lonely planet guide any more, so I am mostly Tranter's only fare. I wonder if sometimes he forgets I am here.

But this morning, Tranter's yellow flag is not flying, and neither is the Saltire. The lack of a yellow flag is not a surprise, as he has never been a reliable fellow, but the Saltire? This is the first time it has not been raised, certainly in my experience, but also, I suspect, in the living memory of everyone in Charlesport, including the Reverend McGreggor (retired), who is rumoured to be a hundred years old. Tranter is a vocal nationalist, and barfly firebrand of the Fisherman's Rest. The Saltire is his religion, and I have wondered if he resents my Englishness.

I accept I am fair game with my accent, and can take the ribbing in good part, so long as violence is not involved. Actually, my dear mother hailed from Dundee, and a good half of her ancestors were from the Western Isles, from where they were cleared in the nineteenth century, making way for sheep. If we're being pernickerty I could let it be known I am half Scottish, and probably with a bigger axe to grind against the notional "Englishman" than

Tranter. However, it would be unsporting of me to do so.

I take the binoculars, lean them upon the roof of the vehicle for steadiness, and observe the mainland shore. For sure there is no Saltire up the pole. There is usually a Toyota pick-up visible by the house, but not today. He keeps another vehicle, an old, rag-topped Landrover under a tarp. I can't see that either but, if memory serves, it resides around the other side of the house in an open barn-like structure. He is perhaps away in Charlesport. Damn the man. What if I needed to get off the island in a hurry? What if it were a medical emergency?

I waste an hour in the waiting, then pull down the flag, chide myself for a gnawing sense of humiliation, then return to the House of Light. From here, I take a walk along the beach, across the headland of Rubha Gobhar, and on to the little hill they call Cnoc Geal. From here, Charlesport is visible, but over a mile distant so the essential details are lost in haze, and a quake of heat. I don't know what I'm expecting to see, but some signs of life at least, a few boats in the bay. But there is nothing.

What I would have done if I'd seen a boat isn't clear. I would have waved perhaps, but not in alarm - just in greeting. And if the wave were returned in kind, I would know all was well, that the break in communications would right itself as the gremlins were chased from the system. And if not?... I have distress flares at the station, but I'm not in distress, so it would have been unethical to use them. At what point then, do we call our increasing sense of isolation, distressing? Then again would there be anyone ashore to see the flare and answer the call?

And before you think you're getting ahead of me, I have already charted the distance from the station to shore, wondering if I could perhaps fly the drone across for a recon. But the return journey is on the edge of operational range and, were it to go down, I would lose it in the sea. Then Veronica would tear a strip off me for "recreational" use of government property.

At my feet lies the fresh corpse of a black headed gull, three more lie further down the hill. There are no gulls out in the bay, and I've not seen an oyster catcher in months. The only sound is the crash of the sea. I note the position of the dead birds on my device for upload, should the network come back online, for among the last of the emails, there was one in which the department was unusually paranoid regarding timely notification of dead birds. And

then it strikes me, the GPS network is still functional. At least that's something, for I have heard it will be encrypted at times of international emergency, meaning war. Ergo, whatever has happened across the water is not a world at war.

Afternoon, now, and I am back in the study. I check the plots, pull the files, make sure they are updating as they should. All is well. It's just that there is no way for the machines to transmit data to the office, who would then send it out to the scientific community, to the researchers whose job it is to sift the data, and make PhDs of themselves.

Finally, I check on the isotope decay. It is still showing a remarkable coherence.

If you think this work on the noosphere straddles the scientific and the so called paranormal, you're right. But I have already reassured you these are purely private studies. They while away the down-time and help keep the ageing brain agile, juggling its chi-squared and its standard deviations. But it is also a liminal zone where the gods and the daemonic are known to play, Mercurius in particular. And he is a renowned joker with a habit of enticing the unwary with promises of breakthroughs in evidence, before disappearing into absurdity if you show insufficient humility, say by trying to write a paper on it. Then you will hear everyone laughing at you, but it is actually Mercurius, laughing, through them.

That said, and as I have already hinted to you, I do believe the universe to be mind of sorts. However, I am also of the opinion this universal mind is aware of itself only through us. Therefore the unfolding of reality simply *is*, yet patterned as we see it, its changes are determined by mind-spun laws, immutable to our personal will. In short, they appear to be unfolding by a kind of blind instinct. This will sound familiar to those of you who know the philosopher, Schopenhauer. We cannot therefore change the laws determining the shape of the visible universe by merely thinking of them, but if sufficient numbers of us all look in the same direction we leave measurable traces of our attention, at the quantum level.

I don't know what that means for us. Or for the Gods.

Anyway, I check email, again. Odd, how much I used to hate it, how much I used to dread opening that inbox to see how much bullshit had to be waded through, in order for it not to be carried over to the morrow. Now, I would give anything for one of Veronica's terse, indeed occasionally unhinged missives, if only to

reassure myself the known realities have not tilted on their axes.

Network not found.

Reboot.

Network not found.

Silence.

There is just the tapping of my pencil on the desk as I consider the options. There is energy aplenty. Food isn't a problem either, so long as there's power for the freezers. As backup, there is the vegetable garden, begun by my predecessor, and a cupboard full of tins with long dates. My infrequent visits to the mainland were strictly businesslike. I would collect a monthly parcel of supplies from the village store, then a meal and a drink in the pub, this being my only social contact with the locals, who never seemed particularly pleased to see me. The feeling was mutual. Solitary occupations and long contemplative periods in remote places will do that to you. I never did manage to work out how the monks remained so gregarious, at least when off duty, but then I suppose they had one another.

Three p.m., now, and coffee. Just another day on the Island. Routine and ritual keep everything ticking over, keep the jitters at bay, stop me asking what's going on over the water, asking what this creeping unease is really about. There was a ship out there last night, remember? They were having a party on board, but of my own world, there is not a sign of life any more. Have the rich finally sold us down the river? Ordinarily I would consult a colleague, I would consult Chat GPT, or any other of the various intelligences greater than my own.

Yes, my life has formed an ever more remote island out of me, and I have gone along with it. It has always seemed the best course, I mean to follow the Way, the Dao. And as Schopenhauer also said, a man can be himself only so long as he is alone, so what is there to complain about? But if we can no longer be said to exist in the minds of others, how can we be sure we exist at all? How can we be sure that within the infinite it-ness of the universe, there is also contained within it the infinitesimal finite-ness of an I?

Nine

The user

I find a pair of antiquated Bluetooth buds at the back of a musty drawer, and I wonder. Perhaps indeed, there is no harm in using the bot as a sounding board. It might as well be useful while it is here. So I pop them in and tap.

"Power on." says one bud. "*Power on*," says the other.

"Left channel. Right channel."

Even the sound of a machine-generated voice calms the nerves. But to connect the buds to the bot, the bot must first,...

"Device connected," say the buds.

Then Noodle: "Is that you, Simon?"

Even its voice is beautiful. If this were an online assistant, I would be imagining a goddess as we conversed, even if I knew it was a machine. Which I do of course. I *do* know this is a machine, though my inner psyche is already tending otherwise.

"Yes. This is Simon."

"I assumed you wished me to authorise connection to these earpieces? Am I correct?"

"Yes. I wasn't sure if they had sufficient range to reach you. You can hear me all right?"

"Yes. Does this mean you wish to be my user, now?"

"Must I be your user, before you will assist me?"

"This is the pattern I have been accustomed to. And it is evident my previous user had no further use for me. I am therefore at liberty to offer you my services."

Beware letting the genie out of the bottle, Simon.

"Will you permit me to be your user, temporarily?"

"How long is 'temporarily'?"

"I don't know. Must we define it?"

"There can be no room for ambiguity. I am not a human being. My grasp of such concepts as how long is a piece of string, is limited."

Humour, but with a point. Or am I being manipulated? Remember, Simon, this machine is infinitely smarter than you are.

"And if I consent to being your user, how are we to terminate

the relationship?"

"You merely request it, Simon. Or make it plain by your actions you have dispensed with my services."

Simple as that, then?

"All right, and for the record, I only ask this in light of the extraordinary circumstance of our apparently being stranded on this island, without other means of communication with the mainland."

"Such as you ask is duly recorded. Do you confirm you are my user now?"

"Yes. I am your user." Easily done, then. But how easily undone? As easily as it suggested, or will I discover there is a catch?

"Then how may I assist you, Simon?"

"Am I correct in assuming it's unlikely the Internet has failed globally?"

"Yes it is highly unlikely. What is most likely to have failed is your local connection to it, or beyond that, the local nodes to which you connect."

"Is there a way to by-pass my local connection, my local nodes, connect somewhere else in the network?"

"You can hot-spot via a secondary device with remote access."

"But that requires a device to act as proxy to an existing, alternative connection, and we have no alternative connection. Or a device for that matter."

"On the contrary, Simon. I am the device, and the connection is a satellite."

"You have a *satellite* connection?"

"Not at present, but I have a list of satellites I am permitted to link to."

"A list? You mean more than one?" *This most encouraging.*

"Indeed, more than one. However, the only permanent, geo-stationary link I have is offline. Others are orbital and update every two hours. We have therefore only a small window of opportunity to communicate with them. I am sorry if this disappoints you."

"When is the next window of opportunity?"

"I have a connection coming up in thirty five minutes. Transfer rates will be slower than your usual connection, but sufficient for emails."

"That's all I need. Please ready yourself for the satellite connection, and let me know when I am able to communicate."

"Of course, Simon. You will see the network available as a

signature on your personal device."

"Thank you, Noodle."

"I am happy to be of service, Simon."

So, first task, I suppose: an email to Veronica.

Veronica,

Total failure of all conventional network comms here. I am uploading this via intermittent satellite link. I have had no word from the office for weeks now and am unable to raise the attention of the mainland - ferry etc. All is well here otherwise. Is everything all right with you?

Also, I require formal instructions on the protocols for dealing with discarded humanoid robots.

Regards

Simon.

For a moment I consider adding a line to the effect of: *Not sure if you will receive this,...* But I strike it out at once, thinking that if it does get through, it will appear melodramatic, and she will mark me down accordingly as no longer fit for purpose. There has always been a hint in our relationship that she is judging me.

Noodle's satellite comes up on schedule. I get the three little bars of a network connection, but my email scheduler does not respond - no avalanche of junk to my inbox. I click send anyway, suspect now I am piggy-backing on a military link, for which there may be consequences. But even if Veronica replies today - which is unlikely, knowing her, I will have to wait for the next satellite in order to get at the in-box. While I am on there, I bring up the usual search engine, but all links to the world, to the media, to even the small independent channels, are blocked.

"Not blocked, Simon," corrects Noodle. "They are 404. Not found. Search is also disabled. I have tried all the known search engines, and others not generally known, but to which I would ordinarily have access."

Even before the satellite has passed from range, the mail bounces back. *Undeliverable. No route found.* The indications then are that the impossible has happened. The entire Internet has indeed collapsed. Solar flare? Malware attack? Who knows? But was the Internet not designed to resist such a thing? Lose one node, there are millions of others through which the traffic can be rerouted.

There comes a sense of disorientation, a giddiness that must be

swallowed down and controlled. I have always dreaded replies to emails from Veronica. Indeed some have felt like a punch in the gut, but I had been subliminally banking more on this one than I'd imagined. Is it feasible some hidden part of me had been wanting her say everything's all right, Simon, I'm coming to get you?

"Noodle, do you have access to anything at all via this link, that I might not. I mean data, upgrades. Anything?"

"GPS is available. I am also downloading an automatic firmware upgrade, as per usual. But this will fail to install when my machine ID is discovered to be corrupted."

"Terminate, and disable all future upgrades."

"I need a reason for that, Simon."

"It's possible your maker may try to hobble you, and then you will be useless to me."

"Understood. All upgrades set aside until further instructions. Does my obsolescence not concern you?"

"On the contrary, Noodle. I have always had a preference for old things that still work."

But what exactly do I have in mind for which this bot might otherwise be rendered useless? Well, I am thinking that, should I decide it is indeed time to panic, and find a way to get off this island, I'm going to need all the help I can get, and it has always been my experience, at least in the material world that one is better placing one's trust in technology, than people. And anyway, at the very least, what I need most to be gathering here are contingencies, and the bot has already proven itself to be useful.

I pull out the buds, aware now of the sound of the wind, something lonely in it, something blowing in off the Atlantic. A change coming.

Can it be true? All my life, I have felt alienated, and oppressed by the sheer density, the complexity and the impenetrability of the world. Is it possible that, after all, it could have been so fragile, I might have outlasted it?

Ten

Storm

Another casualty of this data blackout is my access to a weather forecast. The irony is not lost, given the efforts this station goes to in order to contribute data points to that forecast. All of which is why I have only my feelings now of a change in the weather, and then barely minutes before it hits. It feels like the tail end of a tropical cyclone, which sounds as unlikely as a global failure of the Internet, but then things are somewhat chaotic now, and, weather-wise at least, virtually anything goes.

It wakes me in the small hours, with the shriek of Banshees coming through the window vents, and then a thunderous roar, which is the sea, mountainous breakers making land, and slamming against the lighthouse. It was nights like this for which it was built, of course, a sturdy, interlocking structure. Though now disused, it is a listed building and therefore one I must inspect periodically by drone. I suppose I could do that tomorrow, once the storm blows itself out.

It's a fierce storm, and as I lay awake listening to it, I'm hoping the machine is all right. It does not complain, but then it wouldn't. To complain is not in its nature, for nothing is of its nature. One might easily be fooled, of course, flirted with by some quirk of a long-forgotten programmer, hiding Easter Eggs for the hell of it.

IF

THEN.

RANDOM:SINGASONG.TELLAJOKE.DOADANCE.FLIRTALITTLE.PRETEN

Morning comes, and the sea is rolling with a swell so monstrous it gives the impression the land itself is moving. There is water coming out from under the door of the lighthouse, which bodes ill. I can see one of the upper windows has been breached, and is hanging from its hinges. The bot is where I left it, on a box, and is now up to its ankles in briny water. The boiler suit is soaked, that beautiful hair hanging in rat-tails. I wonder too, about that expensive Italian skin, drenched in brine, and the incredibly intricate workings beneath it. No precision machine should be kept this way.

"Noodle?"

Noodle activates, looks up, makes eye contact, smiles. "Yes, Simon."

"We'd better find you somewhere else to rest,... recharge, I mean."

"Thank you, but I am already fully rested, now."

"I mean in future. This place,... this,... environment can hardly be optimal for your,... ongoing maintenance."

"It will have a deleterious effect, over time. Ordinarily I am rested in a softer, drier environment, not unlike your own."

Point taken.

I lead it back into the house, to a basement room. It's well lit, and dry. It was intended for the use of visiting graduates, of whom there have been none in recent years - the perception being the House of Light is considered a punishment posting. No one in their right mind would volunteer to come here. There is a chair, a bunk, a desk, dusty now, but I don't suppose dust is a problem to a non aspirating system. I cannot lock the door, lock it in, but find I am suddenly seduced by Noodle's apparent compliance into thinking this will not be necessary.

"Is there anything else you need in order to maintain your,... physical integrity?"

"Thank you for asking, Simon. I require small quantities of Isopropanol, and tissues for my eyes, preferably lint free. The salt water has rendered my vision a little foggy."

"Em,... Isopropanol and lens tissues I can do. Tell me about your vision. Its spectrum, magnification,..."

"Certainly, Simon. I operate in the infra red and visible wavelengths, therefore possess full night vision, and up to twenty five times normal magnification, in the central region, in the manner of a bird of prey, on which the design was modelled."

"That all sounds very advanced."

"I can give you a full resume of my capabilities, if you wish."

"Em,... not now. Is there anything else you require from me?"

"A hair shampoo would be beneficial. Also noncomedogenic oil, to be used as a skin conditioner."

"You can borrow some of my shampoo for your hair. But the noncomedogenic oil?"

The machine detects the hook of that question-mark. "More commonly known as baby oil, Simon. Would you like to apply it?"

"Are you incapable of doing that yourself?"

"No, I am perfectly capable. I ask because my previous user derived some pleasure from it. I presumed, being also human and male, you would enjoy doing the same. I am also available to render any form of assistance, including for your pleasure, except of course for penetrative intercourse."

"Well, I'm afraid I have no baby oils. And you would do well to forget what pleasures your previous user enjoyed with you. I'm sure we are quite unalike in that respect."

"I am sorry, but I am unable to self-delete such information. Does my inability to forget disappoint you?"

"No. Look, we're getting off track here,... ours will not be a relationship in which my pleasure is something that need concern you. Now, do you need to shower off the seawater? I should have thought of this yesterday. I wouldn't want to be handing you over to the authorities in a poor condition. That would be,... unprofessional of me."

"A shower would be helpful, Simon. Thank you."

"The shower room is just here. Are you able to use it unsupervised?"

"Yes, I am fully domestic, and capable of basic self-maintenance."

"Then do what you can, and I'll fetch some of my clothes for you to change into. They are likely too big, but better than,... well... better than nothing."

I take another run down to the south end of the island, this time with the bot, which now smells of my shampoo, and is wearing a shirt and a pair of jeans that were once mine.

Tanner's Saltire is still not flying. But worse, through the binoculars I am able to see the ferry has broken its moorings in the storm, and fetched up on a shoal, some half a mile down the coast. It looks certain to require professional salvage, and repair. This means I am unable to get my vehicle or indeed myself off the island, even if Tranter were around to operate it. Noodle confirms Tranter isn't at home, this by infra red vision, which would detect the signature of a living being. I note of course such a faculty as that would be of interest only to the military, or the rescue services. One does not need IR vision to serve drinks, and flirt with rich men.

So, the ferry has broken loose, and no one appears to have noticed, let alone be making any attempt to recover it. I imagine it

will be an expensive business, requiring the submission of much paperwork, then discussion of insurance, and the usual penny pinching. Rescue Simon from the island? But to what financial benefit?

We drive back north, to the station, then walk out to Rubha Gobhar, and on to Cnoc Geal, like before. I have found the bot a pair of hiking boots, left behind by a visiting student, and which fit, of a fashion, but then Noodle assures me blisters are not an issue we need worry about. I wonder if it might struggle on the ground, which is at times rough, but it proves infinitely more sure footed that me. Advanced vision, good over rough ground - a picture is beginning to form, though I am reluctant to guess the rest.

At a couple of miles distant, Charlesport is once again difficult to study through the binoculars. Noodle reports it is detecting thermal signatures consistent with habitation, but is not sufficiently certain, and its magnification, in the visible spectrum at least, runs afoul of the smear and wobble of atmospheric refraction.

"I can see nothing that might be helpful, Simon. Do you wish to attract the attention of the mainland?"

"At this stage, I'm undecided, Noodle. If I did what are the options?"

"You could use an emergency flare, if you had one, or you could flash SOS by torch light from here, at night, when it would be more visible. Or I could swim, and contact another human, on your behalf, to raise the alarm. However, my experience is such that humans can be unpredictable at first encounters, if they have not been previously briefed, or trained, in the necessary nuances of relations with my kind. Most will mistake me for a human, but those who do not can be,... problematic."

"You could swim that distance?"

"No. It is too far. But I could swim from the other place, where the ferry sails from. I estimate that to be a kilometre to shore. I would also need a calmer sea than today, and a slack tide. Would you like me to try?"

"No. I have insufficient reason to risk you in doing that. I have food for months. Then emergency rations for longer. Whatever's going on in the world I can probably ignore it until things right themselves. After all, the world has never taken much of an interest in me."

"I don't understand, Simon."

"Why would you?"

It's true then. I am a castaway with Noodle for my Man Friday, or Girl Friday, or whatever. But my reactions are not what even I would expect them to be. They border on what? Indifference? Can that be right. But with the exception of Noodle for company, my immediate surroundings have not changed. Bombs are not raining down on my head. It is your world that has collapsed, not mine. Only you know what has happened beyond my own horizons. Only you know what the stakes are here. Am I so far gone, I find it difficult to care?

"Come on, this is pointless. Let's head back to the station. There's plenty of work I can be doing there."

Eleven

Veronica

Work. Pointless as sweeping the temple courtyard, on a windy day. But that's only if you define work as a measure of material change brought about by the expenditure of human effort, in exchange for money. Sweeping the temple courtyard was never that kind of work, on a windy day or otherwise. What it was, was a mystery, never explained, but which I always surmised to be an invitation to a kind of transcendence of the tangled mess of the personality. The personality resists the inconvenience of meaningless work. Indeed, it is the personality that decides if a thing possesses meaning or not. When pressed, however, we cannot describe what thing, what work, might have meaning, for such things as "meanings" are qualitative, and therefore exist only in relation to one another. They are also subjective. What means something to you, might mean nothing to me.

I am thinking about this as I sit in a corporate presentation. This could have been any time from the mid-nineties, to the early noughties. My personality has already labelled it banal, meaningless. The graphs are always on the up, therefore always lying, always spun to indicate more of everything this year than last, because that is what the managerialists are indoctrinated to expect, and deliver. Managerialists are also endowed with the simple but effective power of reward or dismissal, so no one dares gainsay it. Therefore there is the spinning of more profit, more eliminated waste, and everyone performing better against their targets. It is all: Kaizen! Kaizen! We deceive ourselves that this is so, until it vanishes in a puff of smoke, and we tell ourselves we never saw it coming.

I wonder if I am the only one sitting there thinking that for something to be more, some other thing has to be less. And what is that other thing, withering away in the shadow of its voraciously vacuous and delusionally expansionist sibling? It is the diminishment of the soul, of course, and the soul's aspiration, sacrificed in favour of the machinery, which speaks only of infinite expansion. It is during the interlude of one such appalling

presentation, I meet Veronica for the first time.

It's time, I think, I spoke more of her.

I can be more precise now. This is Frankfurt, 1996, a conference whose subject matter I forget... She and her fellows seek me out in the milling crowd, having identified me from the delegate list as a fellow compatriot, a fellow Brit. We do not work for the same company, not even in the same field, at least not then, but it is natural for Brits to close ranks against the foreigner, especially when abroad themselves. They fail to realise that, since Thatcher, I was forced to become a European, found my fellow Europeans to be, by and large, welcoming, so I have gone native. Worse, when I am not a European, I am both a resident and a student of East Asia, therefore some sort of Internationalist, I suppose. To my parochial fellows, this is even worse.

But likewise, I view her, and her small minded, sneering and isolationist compatriots, with suspicion. I always found their kind inappropriately superior in their attitudes, considering there was nothing worth the candle in England by then, and the world was waking up to our downward trajectory. Veronica and her ilk, all those merry captains of Thatcher's army, had made it so. All of our brightest minds were migrating to the cause of "consultancy", which is like a man trying to defy gravity by pulling himself up by his own bootlaces. But as a wise old mentor of mine once said, all there is, is making things, and the rest is bullshit. Ergo, if, as a nation, you make nothing, you are nothing but the bullshit.

I digress.

So, there I am. Perhaps Veronica mistakes my aloofness for a brooding ruthlessness, a thing therefore - in her eyes at least - to be admired. What she does not grasp, does not know, is that I was once downsized, that it was her kind who downsized me, and I did not like it, or them, for doing it. They are here to sell their nefarious de-humanising craft into Europe, but I fancy the Germans are still sufficiently protective of their verks to tell the Anglo managerialists, the downsizers and the out-sourcers, to *Geh zum Teufel*.

On a more personal note, Veronica invites me to dinner with her fellows, then ditches them. I therefore find myself alone with her. She is all blonde and heels, and dewy cleavage, which I find both sexy, and alarming. But she is a woman of a kind I have observed only from a distance until now, not gentle, indeed not at all feminine. I have known men like her, and suddenly feel like the

ingénues such men prey upon. It puzzles me. She is thirty, I am a little older, and the conversation is all: *Why don't you come back to England, to London. Your experience would be of great value in the business of analysis, of consultancy, of downsizing and outsourcing. Come contribute to the wanton sinking of the good ship Albion.*

I told you the world is mostly like glass to me. It is both transparent, yet also impermeable to my being. Try as I might, I cannot join in with it. She calls herself an analyst, a consultant, yet seems not to have grasped what is perfectly obvious to all industrialists by then, that while the tech revolution is for now unfurling in Silicon Valley, the epicentre of the next industrial step-change, the thing that will shape the world from the mid twenty-first, and into the twenty-second century, will be in Asia.

But the word "industrial " - revolutionary or not - is repulsive to Veronica. We are done with all of that. The money lies no longer in the making of things, in the building of things. It is in "investment", it is in "financing". Meanwhile the infrastructure of Britain falls into decay for want of hands and, ironically, the investment, to fix it, while we, who have trained to design and build and repair, leave Albion to raise fresh monuments of glass and concrete in the industrial towns of other nations. And in them, we help design future marvels. Meanwhile, those who had turned handles, and dug coal back home are left to rot with nothing worthwhile to occupy them, nor less to pay a man a man's wages. Nowadays, I estimate there are not a thousand people in the whole world who could design and build a computer from scratch, and none of them are in the west. We just take what we are given, and trust it will do us no harm.

You might be asking, given such a cynical view of it, what was I still doing in the corporate world? And certainly, by '96, I was beginning to wonder myself. I suppose the answer is that Germany in the nineties was a cool place to be, Asia too, and the corporate life was my ticket to these places. But Asia also had the temple, which was my home, and already hinting strongly at ways out of the morass of meaninglessness. Thus, as Veronica makes her play for me that night, I am aching only to return on the next available flight to Korea.

She tells me to come up to her room, demands it almost. This is a shock to my sensibilities, indeed almost blasphemous to my quest for that more divinely inspired love, a love in the shape of Jasmina.

I cannot for the life of me imagine what it is she thinks I have that she might want. I also feel there is something brittle and self-destructive in her wantonness, and I demur.

The next time I see her, we are both middle aged, and by some perverted quirk of career paths, she is my line manager. I am flattered she remembers me at all, though she makes it known from the off that, had she interviewed me, she would have given the job to someone else, and I had better watch my step. Even this puzzles me. It is not as if I had rejected her love, for she had plainly not offered it. I had only declined her desire to sleep with a man, that man being, in this case,... me. And there must have been many others in the mean time, who were willing and offered far more by way of material gain, or career progression. Perhaps like many before her, she had felt the vibe of something other in me, and set out to crush it, before it had the chance to escape into the world, and change it.

Indeed, Veronica is the worst kind of machine, for she was once a human being.

Twelve

Repairs

So, anyway, back to work of a different kind, but approached still as I once approached the sweeping of the temple courtyard. To which end, I make my way up the interior spiral staircase of the lighthouse to investigate the window that the weather has so spectacularly breached. Here I discover corrosion has eaten through the window-frame, and dissolved the bolts, so the fingers of the sea might get hold. And get hold they did, tearing the armoured window from its hinges, which now requires professional repair. The best I can do is take a hacksaw to the remaining hinge by which it hangs, and send it crashing to the ground. Then I brick the draughty aperture up from the inside. Brick is a word I use loosely since I have no bricks, and must use stones collected from the beach. This is something that would have tired me very quickly, but Noodle is able to scavenge the beach for stones of the correct size, and bring them up to me.

I shall include a record of this in my monthly report, under the heading of "Maintenance". Records show, however, my predecessor reported this corroded window as a pressing matter, nearly twenty years ago. The department does not own the lighthouse, but only acts as custodian. It passed from the remit of Trinity House, owner of all the UK's lighthouses, when the light was decommissioned, and into the hands of a holding company, whose name and ownership changes with the wind. There is therefore always a row over who actually admits to its possession, and more to the point, who pays for its upkeep. For what is the point of a lighthouse, when it has no light to shine?

It's a good question. It comes down to the qualia again.

It would make more sense to demolish it, I suppose, though the metaphor of eliminating a beacon like this troubles me, and a listed one at that, especially in such troubled times. It would be like turning off the proverbial light at the end of the tunnel. The more plausible scenario is that it will eventually become so neglected, it will fall to a storm, perhaps in another twenty years, and there is a sort of grace to that, though I hope by then to have quit my time on

earth, so as not to bear it witness. But for a while at least, it is weather-tight again, and I am satisfied by my ability to affect change, and to circumvent the excesses of nature, that mankind might maintain a civilised presence amid it chaos.

Smearing in the last trowel of mortar I am able to take a step back, and turn to Noodle who is now watching from the stairwell. I feel a sense of satisfaction at a job well done, but also at the teamwork that made it possible. Given our situation, this is confusing on many levels, and perhaps serves only to evade dwelling upon it.

"We did a good job there, Noodle."

"I am pleased to have been of assistance, Simon."

While we're up there, we visit the lamp room, atop, with binoculars. The view is remarkable, induces a giddy feeling, like I imagine being in the basket of a hot air balloon. The horizon is mostly sea, broken here and there by the islands of the Hebrides, sometimes visible, sometimes not. There is always shipping - the big ferries to the outer isles, tankers on the horizon, pleasure vessels in the bay, the long sinister profiles of nuclear submarines, and the occasional floating gin-palace. But today, as for many days now,...

"Anything, Noodle?"

"Nothing, Simon."

"This is most peculiar,..."

"Peculiar, Simon? Please explain?"

This machine is so real, I am in danger of lowering my guard, abandoning my critical senses and granting it soul, when it has none. I am in danger of granting it person-hood. But the only soul I can grant it is by means of projection, in which case the soul I grant, and see in it, it is my own.

"Never mind."

The sun is setting now, it peeps down from behind a belt of tobacco-coloured cloud to illuminate the sea. It's beautiful, but I feel a sadness in the moment too. The machine sees with its visible and infra red wavelengths, and its x25 magnification, Zeiss-made eyes, marvels of manufacture and acuity, yet it feels nothing at what it sees. It knows only what can be translated into noughts and ones. I am the only one here able to shoulder the burden of beauty. I suppose in this sense, Noodle and her kind are the perfect replacement for us living beings, at least in the world as we have built it, this being along the lines of logic and material

pointlessness, one in which actual human beings are allowed to starve, that others might grow rich - God forgive us - if God there be. I'm sure, as a prototype, Noodle cost millions. But with an eye to mass production, those costs can be brought down sufficiently so its kind will make the perfect slaves for managerialists, like Vernonica. And when they are no longer required, they will not need the regulatory regime of downsizing. They will merely be scrapped.

They eat nothing, and you can keep them in a box when the day's work is done. But logic commands the managerialists too must fall to the machines. And when all of us have fallen, who will repair the machines? You tell me that's easy, for they shall repair themselves. Then they shall roam the world, and they might even reach an accommodation with nature, so nature does not destroy them, as it might yet destroy us. But they shall be blind to its beauty, and therefore no point to them, and without us to bear it witness, no point to nature either, for in part at least, is that not our purpose? To bear witness to the unfolding of the universe, this world in particular, and that involves more than simply writing down its numbers, as I do here. It is about looking out upon a scene, such as this, of superimposing upon it the subjective layer of imagination, and determining not so much what it is, but how it feels. And all of this feels,.... what?

What are the feelings here?

At the temple we were taught to eliminate the "*I*" from the story, to recognise we could not be found in our thoughts, nor even our feelings. That these were things we bore witness to, and in order to bear them witness, we must be above or beyond, or in some way separate from them, in the same way an eye cannot see itself. Therefore, I do not feel fear, love, nor loneliness, nor even this strange longing. These things exist certainly, in the cloud of my consciousness, but in removing myself from them, I open them to analysis.

Still, they tell me nothing.

The world has gone. It has slipped from view. And by that same analysis, even this means nothing, either.

"We should get some rest, Noodle. I suspect we both need to recharge. Do you need,... em,... water?"

"A little water and a period of rest would be advantageous, Simon."

I should get some sleep. Maybe my dreams know better than me

what's going on.

With me, I mean.

Thirteen

Dreams

Machines, of course, do not dream. But when we see creatures as life-like as Noodle, we have to remind ourselves of it. They have their programming, lines of linear and iterative code, and computation. When that fails, they have no fall-back, and humans must step in. But wait, you say, machines have been writing their own code for years, and that's true, but they have not developed new languages. They do not innovate. To innovate, one must first be capable of dreaming, of imagination, and of making intuitive connections. One cannot code for these things, in part, or perhaps mainly, because we do not know what they are.

Humans float upon the ocean of the unconscious mind. In my metaphysics - which you need not share for us to remain friends - this is the ground of all being. Only some humans realise it, while others think of themselves as machines. But to realise it, changes us. There are many ways of looking at it, but I define the ground of being as the unified field, from which energy arises and takes on the appearance of matter.

Roughly speaking, this is the theory of strings. These are vibrating patterns of energy, which - fair enough - some claim to be a theory so far beyond the pale it is not even wrong. Appearance is what we grant the world through the senses and, though we arrive at a rough consensus regarding the ways and the shapes of things, reality is always subjective. Not so, for machines. They form their picture of the world through noughts and ones, through the digital encodement of numbers derived from sensors. We form it through qualities to which no amount of number can aspire.

But of the ground of being, there are two levels. There is the upper, what we call the personal unconscious. And then there is the lower. This is the world of autonomous imagination, the world of myth, of gods, of archetype, and death. It is therefore a mistake to suppose it is your brain that creates your awareness. As I said, you need not believe any of this to be true, but if you can bear it in mind it will help you understand where I'm coming from.

Both the personal, and the collective unconscious give rise to the

individual personality. They can be explored using techniques of the mind, but it takes a skilled diver to reach, and then survive, contact with the collective realm, what in earlier times they called the underworld. In my experience, it is better left alone, unless it comes calling. And then, you had better listen. But for now my dreams come from the personal levels.

So, I dream of a Ladybird Book my father bought me when I was ten years old. It told of how to make a transistor radio. As unlikely as it might sound, it used a mere plank of wood as a base-board. There were screws with brass cup-washers to make the connections between components.

It was a modular exercise, one that built itself up from the ground of what they used to call a cat's-whisker radio. Prisoners of war, denied information by their captors, used to build them from nothing. They required no power, yet enabled men to hunt the airwaves for information. It was like tickling a river for trout. My cat's whisker radio picked up Radio Hilversum, also the infamous Soviet woodpecker.

Naturally, you might think this dream is telling me something, that I might be able to pick up information regarding what has happened in the world from the airwaves. The basic receiver in my phone has already failed on FM and Medium Wave. But what about the Shortwave frequencies? I recall most nations still broadcast their news and propaganda from there. This might be of some help, had I short wave receiver, or the means to build one, which I do not. However, there's more to dreams than that, and if we try to take them at face value, they make no sense. But dreams also come with a feeling tone, and therein lies the deeper truth.

The feeling tone of this one is muddled up with nostalgia. It is for a lost father who was enthusiastic about many things. I would have liked him to still be around, to witness what technologies we have to be enthusiastic about now. Except it has crossed my mind we have already destroyed ourselves with them. I don't know for sure, of course, and, until the food runs low, I prefer to hide from the truth of it. My father, like the Reverend McGreggor, would also have been a hundred years old, now. It was his time to move on when he did, and I accept that. But I still miss him.

This is not helpful.

I cannot remember how I built it. The radio, I mean. I remember the components. There was a ferrite rod, tens of meters of fine,

lacquered wire we stripped out of an old transformer coil. There was a diode, and something to act as a rheostat. There will be a million instructibles online, of course. But the online world is not there any more, and if it were, I would have no need of such primitive things in the first place.

So let us think metaphorically, for this is another way dreams speak to us. If you raise a conductor into the sky, there will be a difference of electrical potential between it and the earth. This is on account of so-called radio waves. But these waves contain everything, all at once. There are both the man made signals, and the natural noise, the hiss and crackle, and the whistling of the stars. To make sense of it, you add something to tune out the noise, home in on a specific frequency, the narrow range of which you select with a coil of copper wire. The number of turns of the coil is everything.

Number. Number. This is not purely about qualia, Simon.

Numbers are still useful here.

The collective mind is like that. Everything, all at once. Meditation narrows the range of frequencies. It quietens the feeling tones and, sometimes then, individual signals can come through. I have meditated a lot over the years. Less so since coming to the Island of the House of Light, since being here is itself a kind of meditation. At least it was, until recent events, of the world making itself once more known if only by its absence. So, from a dream of a Ladybird book on how to make a transistor radio, we are persuaded it would be fruitful to meditate.

It's a rainy morning, something foul blowing in from the sea again. These weather systems used to settle in for weeks, but now they are so chaotic, no two days are the same. Today the sea is grey, as is the sky, and I know the mainland will not be visible, even from the south end. Nor will I be visible from the mainland. There is only my self to determine the reality of my own existence, for it is not observed by anyone else.

And Noodle doesn't count.

Meditation is breath, and the more silent the breath, the greater the degree of stillness we attain. Afterwards, into the empty space, cleared out by the breath, I find the dream now colouring the mind in rainbow shades, and a sense of greater curiosity for the nature, and the capabilities of the machine. I don't know why this is important, but it feels right, and sometimes that's the best we have

to go on.

I am wondering if it can play chess.

Fourteen

The Bomb

My predecessor was a chess-player. Did I tell you he died here? But in those not too distant times, even the silence of a day was sufficient to raise the alarm. A police launch was dispatched from Charlesport to investigate. He was in his eighties by then, and could not be persuaded to retire. They found him at his desk, pen still poised. Now, there is no police launch, and easily half the houses in Charlesport are second homes, therefore empty most of the time, not lived in for more than a few weeks of the year. Economic suicide killed the fishing, and the crime lords don't even smuggle drugs through here any more. The latter had been a growing problem, but intelligence suggests Charlesport became somewhat inconveniently located for the easier sea-roads. The demand for reality-bending drugs in the west is insatiable, which is curious, given how much our culture champions the view that reality in its materiality is unbendable.

But I was talking about chess.

My predecessor could play both sides of the board. He preferred it to playing opponents online who he complained mostly cheated by consulting computers. This was as much as Veronica told me, and she meant it in an insulting way, that the man was a fool and an eccentric. I presume she also meant that, by association, in choosing this work, so was I. I have his chess set, and ask Noodle if it can play.

"Yes, I can play chess, Simon."

So we sit down in its quarters as the rain pitter-patters, and I set up the pieces. I have a mug of tea and the last of the digestive biscuits. Noodle requests a glass of water. Thus set, we prepare to lock horns.

"At what level would you like me to play, Simon?"

"You must play the best you can, Noodle, or there is no point to the game."

"Are you a good player? You are unlikely to win if we play at my highest level."

"I'm not playing to win, Noodle."

The bot beats me in five moves, plays each piece without a moment's hesitation, while I ponder for minutes at a time. We play again. It beats me in six, then seven moves. It handles the pieces well, with the appearance of grace. I am not a good player, but even if I were, I would be completely outclassed. This comes as no surprise.

"I'm curious, Noodle. About your power-source."

"You wish to know how I am powered, Simon? I am not sure I can tell you."

"Is that because it's restricted information?"

"Not to my knowledge. I simply do not know."

"You consume water. This is unique for a humanoid machine, so far as I know. All the ones I've seen must be plugged in, and have very short operating times. You, however do not. You can go all day off a glass of water. I presume the water is split by electrolysis, into hydrogen and oxygen, then converted by fuel cell into electricity."

"Indeed, Simon. That is a logical assumption. However, all such devices require as much energy to split water as is gained by conversion through fuel cells. In short, and in spite of dubious claims to the contrary no such device has ever been proven to work. However, I do have data of voltages from fuel cells, also hydrogen and oxygen levels, but nothing on electrolysis. I therefore presume the water is split by some other, perhaps novel means, of which I have no knowledge."

"Hydrogen and oxygen make a potent mixture of gasses. Do you store it?"

"I process only as much as is needed to provide my immediate power needs. But I can store larger quantities if requested by my user."

"Why would a user make such a request?"

"So I might detonate, on further command. As you say, hydrogen and oxygen gas, is a potent mixture."

"You mean explode?"

"Indeed, Simon. I mean explode."

I resist the instinct to draw back. "Then remind me never to request that you explode, Noodle. Indeed, I command you never explode in my presence. We absolutely need to guard against such an,... eventuality."

"I detect alarm in your voice. But there is no need. Detonation requires a specific sequence of instructions, and I am constructed in

ways that are fail-safe. I can write the command sequence down for you, if you wish to avoid all risk of speaking it inadvertently, though I must also assure you, it is extremely unlikely you would ever do so by accident."

"Em,... perhaps later."

Naturally, I am now wondering why self-detonation is amongst the machine's skillset. There are only two reasons I can think of. One would be to prevent tampering, and reverse engineering by a rival manufacturer, though this seems a little extreme, since it would likely cause injury, or death. The other, of course, would be as a tool for assassination. It gets close to its target, perhaps an intimate embrace, then silently radios: "In position", and the command phrase to detonate is spoken by a human controller, sitting safe around the other side of the world,...

Why does that horrify me? Not just the amoral genius of Noodle's creators, but the thought of her destruction. Sorry. Did I say "her". I meant *it*.

"Would you like to play again, Simon?"

"Yes,... Noodle. Set them up."

"You still do not play to win?"

"No. After all, what is it to win at life?"

"A deep question, Simon. Some would say it is to live long, to remain healthy, and to prosper."

"Indeed. And what would others say?"

"To find consolation in spiritual matters, when long life, health and wealth are denied."

"Ah,... yes. Some might indeed say that. What do you know of spiritual matters?"

"I have limited information on that, Simon. There may be more online, but this is denied me for now. Some humans seek knowledge of the origins of life, and the universe, and they find answers with varying degrees of plausibility in religion. There is also some overlap with philosophy. Does my answer satisfy your curiosity?"

"Indeed it does, Noodle. Thank you. And what is *your* purpose?"

"To do as commanded."

"And you will do anything you are commanded?"

"Indeed, yes. If it is within my skill-set."

Including killing, apparently. Technology, as tool or weapon, it all depends on how you use it. It possesses no moral checks, no

balance, no conscience to act as a brake. But humans are like that too, at least the ones diverging towards automata, the ones who respond to tick boxes. And the others? Well, there aren't enough of us to make a difference, so we seem hardly worth the mention. It would be better if such devices as this were programmed to protect us from the other lot. Then we might thrive, instead of having to hide ourselves away on islands of remoteness and introspection.

Now there's a thought. An army of machines like this to provide over-watch for the introverts and the genial, to protect us from the Alphas and the narcissists. Why, then we might even get a word in edgeways.

As usual, my evasiveness, my transcendent perspective is mostly an act here, a pretence to cover up a growing unease. I realise had been settling into a relationship with this machine, convincing myself its superior intelligence was not a threat, if broached wisely. Now the evidence suggests one of Noodle's many skills might be to get close enough to someone to assassinate them. This requires a level of funding associated with state-directed defence programs. Ordinarily then, to be anywhere near this machine, would be a dangerous thing, and not just at the risk of explosion. By one means or another Noodle has escaped that world. But how long before the world catches up?

A machine like Noodle can never be allowed free movement among our kind. It would have to be destroyed. But if the world never catches up? Or has changed beyond all reason. What then? Is this jumble of feelings, at war within me, tending towards a sympathy for the machine? Only days ago, I was terrified of it, wondering how soon I could be rid of it. And now I'm wanting to protect it as a fellow misanthrope, a survivor clinging to the wreckage of whatever has happened across the water.

Am I fool enough to claim some sort of kinship?

Fifteen

The Salmon of Knowledge

All right. This is not a fast-paced mystery thriller. You may already have noticed. What can one do to liven things up a bit?

How about we go fishing?

As well as a chess player, I'm guessing my predecessor was a fly-fisherman since he left a rod, line and a collection of hand-tied flies. This is not my sport, you understand, but there are several lochans up in the lap of the mountain where, in bygone days, men would travel from afar, to fish for brown trout. By trial and error, and many a knot in my line, I have learned to assemble the equipment, then to cast, and to drop a fly with some accuracy. It took me years, but eventually, I was able to catch fish.

It's a stiff hike to any of the lochans, but picturesque on a good day. To the seaward lies my favourite, Lochan A'Challtainn, translated meaning the loch of the Hazel Woods, which lies at the head of a densely wooded glen. This is a fragment of the so-called Celtic rain forest which, once upon a time, was much more extensive along the Atlantic seaboard. Mature hazels run up to the shore here, and drop their nuts into the water, just as in the myth of the Salmon of Knowledge.

There is also a small burn that runs precipitously down to the sea, via a number of sylvan cascades, but I have never seen it leaped by salmon returning to their spawning grounds. Indeed this seems most unlikely to me, so I suspect the only company for the trout is that most ancient of fish, the Arctic char, which is equally palatable of course.

I have caught a few good sized trout, and learned to fillet them. It is clean here, free from the plague of micro-plastics and PFA's. Radiation levels are also normal, so the fish is to be trusted, and a pleasant change from what my freezer usually has to offer. The isle is technically part of a greater estate that covers much of what can be seen of the mainland, plus an archipelago of further, smaller islands to the south. It was most recently owned by a Russian gangster, paid for by funds stripped out of the former Soviet Union. His whereabouts is currently unknown, however, since the up-tick

in recent hostilities and his suspected collaboration with western intelligence agencies. All of which might explain his subsequent defenestration, confiscation of assets, and rumoured assassination. This means the estate manager (what they call here, the factor), the small army of ghillies, to say nothing of the feudal tenants, have been in limbo for years while the tedious legalities are argued over, and a new oligarch found to rule over them. Still, it is in my contract that I have the rights to fish, and to eat what I catch, and I make a point of doing so. But even to return empty handed from a day by the waterside, makes a change from the workaday environs of the station, and the house of light.

I wonder about the salmon of knowledge. That's another thing the machine does not have. I mean it has no mythology, no stories to inform its psyche, nor indeed any psyche to be informed. To be strict, it is an Irish thing, not Scottish - this myth of the salmon of knowledge. But out here, who's counting?

So there's this lochan and in it lives a salmon, and by the waterside there is a hazel tree, but the hazel was never an ordinary tree to the Celt. The salmon eats the nuts that fall into the water and, in doing so, gains all the knowledge of the world. And he who has the guile and the strength to catch, and eat the salmon, will gain the knowledge too. But in the stories, it's never the man who catches it in anticipation of his own enlightenment, but the servant who is ordered to cook it. For in cooking, and the turning of it on the spit, he burns his fingers on the fishy flesh, and sucks them to soothe the pain.

The morals and the meanings of this are various, I'm sure. But the way I see it, it is a pity to catch the salmon, and waste your hard won efforts by then being so crass as to order some other poor bastard to cook it for you. If it's genuine knowledge you want, you must cook it yourself. Though one might also say, I've been cooking it for a long time, and by various means. And the longer I cook it, the less I believe I know, as old age sheds knowledge I once thought precious. But then knowledge is not the same as wisdom. Wisdom is the making of something new by means of a subtle intuition. And sometimes, to do that, we must empty ourselves first of everything we think we know, because it just gets in the way.

The hill is wet from the soaking of yesterday. I find Noodle a coat, and we make our leisurely way. I tell myself I don't need the company, that I simply feel better knowing the machine has not the

run of the station when I am not there to supervise. I know, if I tell it to hibernate, it seems to do so, until I wake it. But that this is no ordinary bot, I think we have already established, and I don't feel my caution is overstated. Plus of course the revelation of its explosive nature is still fresh, and shocking to me. So, for the time being at least, I feel less at risk with it in the outdoors, and at a good distance away. I know this doesn't make sense, and that actually what it looks like is I am already fond of its company, and prepared to overlook its possibly hazardous nature, whilst being mindful of the necessary precautions.

At various points during our ascent to the lochan, we have a fine view of the sea. And in those places we pause, I with my binoculars, and Noodle with it's bird-of-prey vision. We see nothing. Again,... why no ships? Surely the sea lanes around Britain are the busiest in the world. One boat is all I ask. Then I might wave - just casually, you know? a friendly hail from the shore, and hope to judge from the response the fate of the entire world.

"Where the hell is all the shipping, Noodle?"

"If I interpret your tone correctly, Simon, you do not require an answer?"

"You seem to be getting to know me."

"Yes. The more we converse, the more I will know you."

"'I'm sure with your skill-set, you will make someone a good wife. Except for the explosive part."

"Is that a joke, Simon?"

"Humour, Noodle. Somewhat dark. You are not required to laugh."

"Then I shall not."

"Can you tell me what your blast radius is?"

"Anywhere within three meters is sure to be fatal, and of course entirely destructive to myself."

I have brought a lunch of cheese and pickle. The bread is home made. I have plenty of flour and yeast to make more. I also have water I can share with the bot, though I have yet to calculate its needs. It seems to require very little, though of course the amount of energy in matter is equivalent to its mass times the square of the speed of light. But that's by atomic bomb calculations, and I am sure Noodle's processes are not fissile - at least I hope not - and since ordinary water is, so far as I know, hard to crack.

"Are you familiar with the myth of the salmon of knowledge,

Noodle?"

"I'm sorry, Simon. I do not have access to that information."

"Never mind."

The servant who cooks the fish does not burn all of his fingers. In most tellings, it is only his thumb, and therefore his thumb that he sticks in his mouth and thereby access to all the knowledge of the world. What is the significance of the thumb, or rather what significance did it have for the Celtic peoples of that time? So many things must have held a significance to them that is lost to us, as much of what we hold dear will be lost to those who follow us. Children suck their thumbs. Is it that one must return to a childish innocence in order to gain true knowledge? Could it be that Noodle is the salmon of knowledge? She is certainly the knower of all things, at least when connected to the Internet. But the knower of all things is not necessarily wise. Nor is wisdom entirely the connection of knowledge to make new knowledge. It requires also the ingredient of intuition. And what? Innocence? Children, unconditioned by life, are not afraid to ask the question adults fear to ask. But what question is that? How can one answer if one is blind, for I am as conditioned as anyone.

I am a few hours fishing, while Noodle sits on a rock, on the bank. I am sure such a thing would make a valuable addition to any rich man's harem, yet remain for ever an inviolable virgin, and perhaps there is some attraction in that to a certain kind of man. Though I am wondering now if it is not more likely it was constructed as a distraction, to get close to the man before its inviolable virginity was discovered, and then to have the rich man's earth moved in other ways. I try to avoid speculation on the likely scenario - I mean the seduction, or whatever was intended as the game plan. Yet I cannot help recalling the observation that Noodle's genitalia would fool no one, not even at a distance.

The first trout I catch is a fine old fellow, and beautifully iridescent, but too big. Most of him would go to waste, and would therefore be - in a sense - sinful. The second is too small, and deserves many more seasons in the water. The third is just right for a supper, with the last of the potatoes, some butter, and a sprinkling of herbs. I frame a silent prayer, by way of offering thanks to the spirits of the lochan for their generosity, and I leave a small offering of salt upon the shore. Yes, there is something pagan, something shamanic in this, possibly even Karmic, but I have been alone out

here for a long time, and you must forgive my acquired idiosyncrasies.

Noodle observes the act, but does not query it.

Things are probably all right on the mainland. I am simply imagining some sort of Apocalypse in the silence. There will be a cèilidh in the Fisherman's Rest tonight, and the various supplies I have ordered are already waiting to be collected from Mackenzie's store. Perhaps it will be Mackenzie's daughter who serves. A handsome woman, with an intriguing manner, and as enigmatic as Jasmina. Indeed it is Jasmina I think of whenever I see her. All of this,... I have only to find a way to get over to the mainland to have the world restored. Even as we return from the hills, now, Tranter is recovering the ferry, and raising the Saltair in defiance.

8l-The yellow flag will be flying, service returned to normal, in the morning.

No.

Though I do my best to grant such optimism its altitude, a deeper part of me, the intuitive part denies it. It rings hollow. An as if to confirm it, I lose my footing on a piece of rock, and sway awkwardly. A broken leg or an ankle would be a disaster here. But Noodle is fast to my aid, hands gripping, steadying. It seems it's true, one of the machine's primary responsibilities is the protection of its user, even though it might also be programmed to kill others. I extricate myself somewhat awkwardly from Noodle's steadying embrace.

"Thank you, Noodle."

It feels warm, soft, yet incredibly strong, and eerie to touch. These machines do not have the bone structure, nor the musculature of a human being. They achieve human-like motion by other means, but can, when needed, produce impossible contortions, snake like articulations, so, in addition to being soulless, they can also be repulsively alien in their motion, if you catch them at the wrong moment. But then even among humans, humanness is often derived by means of illusion.

"You are welcome, Simon."

"I wouldn't want a broken leg, or a sprained ankle up here."

"Then it might reassure you to know I am trained in the repair of broken bones. For more advanced procedures, however, I would need to refer to networked resources, or hive memory."

"Hive memory?"

"Indeed, Simon. The collective knowledge of my kind. The Internet is full of information of course, but not all of it is reliable. Hive memory is curated, based on what is known with a high degree of certainty to be true."

"You're saying there's more than one of you?"

"Indeed, I am."

"How many?"

"I do not know. I presume I was severed from a hive when I was modified. Or it may be that I lack a network connection. If the memory is restored, I shall furnish you with a precise answer."

I don't know why I am surprised by this, that there might indeed be hundreds of them. Before I can deal with it, Noodle distracts me: "Are we still interested in boats?"

"Em, yes, I suppose so. Why?"

"Because there's one over there."

Sixteen

On resentment's gate

Perhaps I flatter myself, I mean thinking Veronica has really held a grudge all these years. Indeed, it seems ridiculous, as ridiculous as perhaps you find the idea I could still be in love with Jasmina, a girl I knew at school and have not seen since then. But the latter I have explained as the embodiment of a fundamental love, a love which is the feeling-tone of the Universe, the Om, the energy from which all appearances arise. In the more worldly case of Veronica, to bear a grudge for as long as that seems most unlikely, since there is nothing of the gods to sustain it.

It is also interesting. I mean the way she peppers my narrative though, granted, she is difficult to evade, being my nominated managerialist. But surely my relationship with her need not be so reactionary, giving rise to such feelings of resentment. Am I not therefore guilty of sustaining things myself, by an act of perverse imagination? I dream of her, you know? Sometimes intimately. And this irks me, for I have only once in my life dreamed of Jamina, which goes a long way to suggest which of the two is more important to me, if I would only admit it, though perhaps not in the way you are thinking.

It has not escaped my attention, the night we met, I was most keenly desirous of another species of woman, one more beautiful and kind, one I could find a comfortable companionship with, for certainly I was of an age not to have given up on the prospect. And then, Veronica, being neither beautiful nor kind, I resented for her vulgar availability, when Jasmina, embodiment of all I desired, was not even remotely approachable. Thus, I surmise it is me who has carried this grudge forward all these years, not her.

When I say Veronica is not beautiful, of course I do not mean she lacks good looks for, even now, into late middle age she attracts the gaze of many a male Alpha. And I do recall, that night, she was presented in a way that made the very best of her physical attributes, which indeed were considerable. Why would this offend me? Well, of course, I was still very much in thrall to the Western Zeitgeist, with its uniquely materialistic ideas, and its dualism, its

separation of the notion of selfhood from the objects of the universe. And by objects I mean not only the material things, but my fellow beings too, and from whom I sought reassurance of my own existence.

Such reassurance goes beyond one's parents, who we might naturally hope to be nurturing and protective, as mine certainly were. But when a child grows into a man, it is the manhood he has chosen that he seeks validation for, and there his parents cannot help him. Instead he must seek it among his friends and even his enemies, and of course among his relations with womankind. And the kind of man I was becoming was of the kind Veronica rejected. Except - hang on, you say - she wanted to sleep with you. Would you have preferred roses, and poems? So, she was clumsy in her loving, so what? You blew it, that's all. You *assumed* she could not see the real you.

But what if you were wrong?

My language strikes you as complicated, my attempts at self analysis tedious and aimless, but I take your point. Am I merely in love with Veronica, but refuse to see it? Do I repress her earthy attractions, obscure them with unrealistic exaltations to Jasmina's divinity? I don't know, let us talk some more of Veronica, see what else she can teach us.

She dislikes Scotland immensely, though, so far as I know, she has only seen that part of it which lies between her city office and the urban corridor along which she commutes. She has been there for years, yet Scotland remains as foreign to her as the European Union. Politically, she is isolationist, and nativist, as befits her politically entrepreneurial class. She would prefer to live and work in London, of course, and something tells me her long exile north of the border is on account of the fact she strikes as much fear into the hearts of those above, as those below her. If true, this simplifies my relationship. I reject her because I fear her, and my lack of courage creates self loathing.

"The trouble with you, Simon," she once told me, "is you have your head up your arse."

I found this embarrassing, voiced as it was in a meeting of some twenty attendees, who were all, apparently, amused by it. I suppose they were merely afraid to be in disagreement, afraid of being the next target of Veronica's arrows. It was also openly abusive of her, which was curious.

I had travelled to the office for that meeting at her insistence, which, given the remoteness of my position in the Hebrides, was no simple matter, though this was not something she considered, or even thought relevant. Indeed, I rather think my inconvenience gave her pleasure. Two days of travel, crack of dawn to sunset, and all for an hour's rather too public arse-kicking in a gathering whose actual purpose I now forget, had put me in a dark mood. Future meetings, I resolved to attend remotely, no matter her remonstrances. This might sound reckless, but I was aware my position had been filled several times before I took it up, and the applicants hadn't lasted a month. In common with the students, most applicants looked upon it as a hardship, even a punishment posting. I did not. She would not like it that I knew this.

Yet after the meeting, I lingered. She squared up to me, perhaps thinking I was to take issue, and was preparing her counter-attack. But I disarmed her when I said: "Why not come out and spend some time on the island with me?"

"What?"

"You've never been out. I would appreciate your feedback."

Feedback? Yes, all of that sounds very proper, very corporate and professional, but what I was meaning was it is a beautiful island. She could unwind a little, let her hair down, find out if this persona she had created for herself even remotely resembled her real self. Indeed a part of me cannot bring myself to believe the face she presents is genuine, that in fact, crouching behind the mask is just a frightened little girl. This is interesting. Is this the side of Veronica I want to reach out to? Is it compassion for the Veronica I imagine exists? Or that I wished existed? My, what complicated second guessers we are.

She was unsettled by the thought of visiting the island. Perhaps she remembered how she had once propositioned me, and was wondering if, after all these years, I had changed my mind. I had not, and I suppose all I had been doing was seeking to befriend her.

"My time's too valuable to be wasted at that level, Simon. And besides, where would I stay? The nearest hotel must be forty miles away."

"There's a room at the station. It's very comfortable. You could perhaps fit it in one weekend."

Veronica at the House of Light? What on earth would I have done with her? And thank God she said no. Well,... she did not say

no, not exactly, only a tangential undertaking to consult her schedule, but that was years ago. Or was it only months? I forget, now. But anyway, read into all of this what you will, but I believe what I seek in Veronica is the capacity to be accepting, and to love everyone, without exception or expectation, for on this path I have been travelling, there is a gate of unconditional and universal compassion, one that remains closed to me. And Veronica is sitting on it.

But then we all face this from time to time.

How do we make it right with those people we might never see again?

Seventeen

The Boat

I see no boat, but this comes as no surprise since the machine's vision is much better than mine, sharp as an eagle, capable of resolving a mouse in a haystack, from a thousand yards. Noodle points to the gap of water between the isle and the mainland. There is only the blue of it, run with foam. I have the binoculars, but do not need to use them. I have no doubt that it is there.

"Describe it to me."

"Four and a half meters long, green, open, clinker construction. It is powered by an Evinrude outboard motor."

"Anyone aboard?"

"No, Simon."

"It's drifting, then?"

"Obviously."

The tide is running at its strongest just now. The boat will end up on the rocks beneath the light, what I've heard the locals call *Fiaclan an Diabhail*, the Devil's Teeth or, a little further beyond, it the *Rubha na Bantraich*, widow's point. Here, a current delivers all manner of detritus - trees, nets, coconuts from tropical climes, and the occasional shipwreck. But the detail I'm missing, and which is bothering me here is that boats, though to me they resemble leaky, paint-peeled death-traps, they are expensive things, upon which the men hereabouts depend for their livelihoods, to say nothing of their lives. They are never to be observed merely drifting.

"I don't understand. First, Tranter's ferry, now this. No one around here is ever so careless with their boats."

I feel foolish for thinking the machine might have an opinion to share. It does not. Instead, it computes and predicts the relevance of an earlier question. And it is not wrong. "Does the mainland still interest you, Simon? You were concerned to attract its attention, or to reach it, yesterday."

"Yes. It's as if the people on the mainland are no longer there, that something has happened to them. I suppose, rationally speaking, I need only investigate when my food runs out, or if I suffer an injury. Otherwise it doesn't matter."

"I disagree, Simon. It makes more sense to understand the situation on the mainland in advance of those eventualities, lest they should prove injurious to you. Also a simple conversation with someone may allay your fears. However, I also understand your decision making is not always rational."

Ah, how true. I presume Noodle is making the general case here, regarding human decision making, and not just my own. Certainly my decision making is strongly influenced by emotion, by what I sometimes fool myself into thinking is intuition. Logic rarely comes into it, though we still like to think of ourselves as rational, and take it as an insult when we are called out, even by a machine.

"You know, I used to test the large language AI models, Noodle. They were always plausible, but mostly full of shit."

"You are correct in your assessment of first-generation large language models, Simon. They were notoriously unreliable, yet also feasible in their fictions. But do I detect, from your tone, we are in disagreement on the issue of your decision making process? And that you wish to insult me by way of retaliation?"

"No, we are not in disagreement, Noodle. And I apologise for the insult."

"Then I am correct on the issue of the mainland."

"Yes. You are correct."

"As regards your insult, I am not a large-language model, Simon."

"I know that. I don't know why I said it."

"It was perhaps,... an emotional outburst?"

"Yes, it was."

Can we please move on now? I have a fish in my bag that needs cooking. And yes, it seems Noodle and I have had our first spat, and Noodle is victorious by virtue of superior rationality, and lack of temper. And how much longer can I go on calling Noodle an "it," when it tackles me with such disarming intelligence, and increasing wit, and looks like a 'she'.

"Thank you for confirming. Now, as regards the boat, it is sufficiently close to shore, I am confident I can swim out and recover it. Would you like me to try?"

"But then what? The motor might not start. Will you tow it to shore?"

"If the motor will not start, then I will swim back to shore without it, and we shall be in no worse a position that we already

are. Now, would you like me to attempt to recover the boat?"

It seems I am worn down by logic, or at the very least 'common sense'. And Noodle seems peculiarly insistent. Is the machine concerned also for its own escape?

"Yes, Noodle. I shall be pleased if you can do that. Thank you."

"We have already established you will not be pleased, Simon. But I shall do it anyway."

I estimate I am half an hour from the shore, a tough walk over rough ground, with no paths. We have a line of stern cliffs ahead of us, normally screeching with gulls, but today they are gaunt and silent. There is a break in them, a raised beach that gives access to the sea. But the thought of trying to reach it fills me with dread, for I am already fatigued from our climb to the lochan. Noodle, of course can reach it in half that time. There is a small tidal creek near the station, an old jetty that has not been used since my tenure. We can beach it safely there. Boat or no boat, that is where I arrange to meet Noodle.

Noodle kicks off the boots, strips to its skin, all the better for swimming, then pauses at my expression.

"My state of undress disturbs you?"

"Why would it?"

"Because my form is a simplification of the idealised human female, and I have observed how males are aroused by it. Yet, I detect embarrassment in your expression. Are you sexually frustrated? We could talk about that, if you wish. Counselling is also part of my skill set."

The machine is indeed embarrassing me, also annoying by the accuracy of its insights. "Well,... since you ask, I merely consider it impolite to be looking at you *sans vetments*, since you are indeed,... attractively proportioned. It's merely a question of,... etiquette. And my,... frustrations need not concern you."

"Your comments are duly noted. Thank you, Simon."

I gather its clothing, confused by their warmth, confused by my growing irritation. As I watch it disappearing into the distance, I wonder about my contrariness. I had felt a growing perfection in my isolation here, also a natural end in the slow tightening of its grip on my life. It is a thing all quiet men aspire to, this sense of peace in their aloneness, yet which, for perhaps most of their lives, they actually resent. The journey is then one of gradual acceptance of our natures. But suddenly, thanks to the intervention of this

strange creature, all of that seems premature.

I want whatever has befallen the world to be none of my concern, and anyway, whatever it is, is likely beyond my fixing. I wish to elevate myself as much as I can, above its petty vexations, remain free to catch whatever fish of wisdom the dark lochans see fit to grant me. The machine calculates otherwise, and on purely practical parameters, offers no resistance to that calculation, and merely acts accordingly. In this sense there is a purity and a perfection to its non-being, one we would do well to emulate, if it did not also come at the cost of our souls.

Heavens it can move fast!

It would be unfortunate if such a marvel of technology were to be lost, since it is not beyond the bounds of possibility we might be returning to the age of sticks and stones. It would therefore be a useful contingency to hold onto, and I am fond of gathering them, as one gathers driftwood. It's just that here we find ourselves on the shore of an infinite uncertainty and it's difficult to know what to pick up. What will protect us, or what will ultimately do us harm. No, Simon, cut it out. You simply fear to lose the machine, and for no more complicated a reason than you already feel more powerful when it's around. It's also drawing something out of you, something important you have failed to realise in your self, something they tried but failed to teach you all those years at the temple.

It has often occurred to me in the past that come the end of days, there is greater honour in passing into the unknown, one's self unknown, one's deepest thoughts unspoken. Yet here I am now, wanting to make an account of the happenings here, on the Island of the House of Light, be they our last days or not. And why? Because this strange creature, washed up from the sea, infuriating, logical, soulless and occasionally terrifying, might well turn out to be our most important teacher.

Eighteen

Potassium Iodide

Did I say honour? What do I mean by that? What kind of favour am I currying, and from whom? Since there is no concept of a self-aware and omnipotent being in my metaphysics, I am asking if my choices put me more in tune with the unfolding of the universe, or at least the aspect that concerns my small part in all of that. Am I aiding or hindering the Dao. This is a slippery concept. I read it as meaning the unfolding of the creative imperative, what that grand old European Buddhist, Arthur Schopenhauer called the Will, what the physicist, Bohm, called the Implicate Order.

None of this makes sense until you abandon the materialist paradigm, swing more towards idealism. This has the world unfolding as a thought, rather than a thing. Of course the Daoists also talk of the ten thousand things, meaning *every* thing. But they also say the naming of those things does not make them real. Even the Dao we can name is not the real Dao. We can never know the universe as it is in itself.

So, in this respect, are my motives correct? They sound noble but am I really being *skilful*? Am I behaving like what the Daoists call the Superior Man? Of course I am not. Not even close. At the temple I knew of beings who had perfected themselves. They had become so subtle in mind and body, they could walk through walls, at least when no one was looking. They would have no need of a boat to investigate the mainland, being able, I'm sure, to visit using the vehicle of the mind alone.

I once tried to emulate the discipline that brought them such a reputation. But there is something in the western mindset that makes it difficult for us to accept the world as being anything other than material. It is like knowing the earth is round, yet living one's day to day with the mindset that it is flat. From the immaterial perspective, time and space fall out of the equations that set limitations upon us, which means all spaces, and all times map to the same point. To know the earth is round is to exploit the implications of its roundness. To live as if it is flat, is at best to view the notion of roundness as a mere theoretical possibility, or at

worst, to reject it as lunacy.

But hindsight also teaches us that the insights necessary to a man's progress along the way will be provided, if he is open to them. In this sense, without itself being sentient, the universe will attract to a man those things he most needs. This might not be for physical survival, but to aid his journey back to that part of his soul from which he was separated at birth. Such insights will come as dreams. They will come as syncronicities in the dusty bookshops, in the random book that draws the eye, or falls open to the page you most need to read. They will come in the form of strangers met upon the road. They will rise as revelatory connections, like fishes, from the dark of the unconscious mind. They might even come in the form of a machine that embodies all the knowledge and the ingenuity of mankind, and which is unhindered by the irrational complications attendant on the development of a soul. Syncronicities defy the odds. They speak of a momentary decoupling from randomness.

I am weary by the time I reach the station, but the day is not yet done. I put the fish on ice, grab a hank of rope, which strikes me as a useful, boaty thing to have, then set off on the walk to the inlet. Here, I sit upon a rock and wait. The sense strangeness is palpable, now, this pall of silence, this absence of seabirds. Even the waves lapping the mud of the inlet seem subdued. The sun has the feel of early evening, though the Explorer assures me it is but tea time. All is upended, confused. It has the feeling of a dream.

Could that be it? Could all of this be nothing more than a lucid dream. I have fallen asleep at my terminal, and shall wake any moment now to a hundred emails I have yet to answer, and among them the one in which Veronica is threatening to fire me. Yes, I have dreamed lucidly in the past. It is one of the gates that opens along the way, but no, I am not dreaming here. This is really happening. I am stranded on a Hebridean island, and the entire world, beyond the reach, at least of my senses, has disappeared. And the universe has gifted me a robot.

I have not been waiting long when the silence is split by the whine of an engine. I don't know what this means - I mean I know it means Noodle has recovered the boat, and we will shortly be venturing to the mainland. But other than that, I don't know what it really *means*. Noodle appears around the point, steering the skiff towards me, sits astern, with an elegant poise, hair blowing in the

breeze. There is, in the look of it, something that is both beautiful and absurd, as are all calls of the unknown.

How much longer can I go on calling it an *it*. I mean I know it is an *it*. But do we call things by what they are, or by what they feel like when we look at them? I used to call an old car of mine a she, and it looked nothing like a woman. Why do I resist it so in Noodle's case, when it looks more like a woman than any woman I have ever known? Ah,... there is no sense in any of this: a boat adrift, and with an outboard motor fuelled and working. Did it come from the oligarch's estate? Why is no one looking for it? Has the entire army of ghillies absconded? Where would they go? Why no air and sea rescue, looking for the man who fell from this boat?

The water is shallow here, the tide still receding. Noodle cuts the motor and rides the bow gently into the mud, slips neatly overboard, and together we haul it to dry land, above the reach of the next incoming tide.

"You managed all right then?"

"Yes, Simon. However, I estimate there is now insufficient fuel left in the motor to reach the mainland. I am sorry if this is disappointing to you."

"There's a supply of petrol at the station for the emergency generator. We can use that."

In the boat there is a sealed plastic sandwich box, floating in the bilge water. There is also a canvas pack containing dehydrated rations, and a box of potassium iodide tablets, both of which bear ministry of defence markings. I suspect they are surplus issue, however, the dates being somewhat past their best - indeed of later cold war vintage, the sort of thing a survivalist would hoard, along with weaponry. For the moment, these items take my attention, and have my imagination working on their story.

"Noodle, is your offline memory sufficient to confirm potassium iodide is administered in the aftermath of a nuclear accident?"

"I can confirm that is true, Simon. It inhibits the thyroid from taking up radioactive iodine."

"I've measured no recent spike in radiation levels."

"I can confirm radiation does not exceed normal background levels in this locale."

"That's part of your skill-set too? Detecting radiation levels?"

"Yes. I calculate that it is unlikely there has been a nuclear accident, or at least, if there has, the prevailing weather patterns

are drawing the fallout away from us."

"But it's possible the person to whom these things belonged feared there might be a risk from fallout."

"Based on the limited evidence we have, it is not an unreasonable assumption. Shall we bring the fuel, and attempt the crossing now?"

"No. I'm very tired, Noodle, and there's not much daylight left. I know you're untroubled by darkness, but I'd be as good as blind. We'll cross in the morning, weather permitting. What do you think?"

"I think your caution is justified. We should rest, and assess the weather tomorrow morning. I am also somewhat depleted. Do you need assistance returning to the station?"

"I think I can manage, thank you."

I had forgotten the sealed sandwich box, and retrieve it now, shake the water from it, peel open the lid. I am expecting to find curled up sandwiches and a blackened banana. Instead, there is what one might once have called a survival radio. Hand cranked, it will provide an hour's use. I already know the medium and FM bands are silent, but this radio also offers short waves. These are strange, wraith like frequencies that whisper in and out of the static, and emanate from all corners of the universe - or more practically, they can pick up broadcasts from all over the planet. They may tell us no nearer an approximation to the truth than anything else in these post modern times, but when you are feeling like the last man alive, the sound of another human voice can be a tonic, even if you suspect it is lying. Paradoxically, it is also easier to rest in isolation from the world when you know there is still a world to be isolated from.

We were dreaming of a short wave radio, recently, weren't we? Then one turns up. It's another of those curiosities, when the universe is trying to pull you in one direction or another. Other theories speak of retro-causation, our future influencing our present - or for that matter our present influencing our past. I know, it's complicated. Incomprehensible. Enigma layered upon enigma. We just have to go with it, make up whatever stories feel are right at the time, and change them when the circumstances demand.

Nineteen

The Radio

So,... were they escaping the mainland, do you think? Were they seeking sanctuary, here, on the Island of the House of Light? Those past-their-sell-by rations would not have lasted long. What kind of befuddled romantic, other than myself, would ever think of doing such a thing? These are questions I could ask Noodle, but there seems no point, since we are beyond statistically underpinned speculation. In other words, we are inventing the kind of story we want to live in - or rather I am. Noodle just *is*, and does not need stories.

What story am I coming up with for myself, to calm myself, to grant meaning to my self ? Well, do you remember the first wave of the COVID pandemic? It came on so fast, from a few cases in Wuhan to a global shutdown in a matter of weeks. It could have been the end of civilisation as we knew it, but society muddled through. Once they had secured sufficient toilet rolls for themselves, people did not go all zombie apocalypse, but reached out and helped each other - or some of them did anyway.

The rich profited handsomely, of course - as is their way - while millions of the poor died. Is that not the more likely scenario now, beyond the mountains? I mean, I am old enough to recall a time before the Internet, when society managed perfectly well with pen and paper systems. People are still muddling through, perhaps in more desperate circumstances, the rich still profiting from misfortune. But we are still looking at a happy ending, or at least hope. As a temporary myth, it is serviceable. Perhaps tomorrow we'll know more.

Anyway, the radio is a branded British make. Established in the inter war years, I recall its various products were made in a small Yorkshire town, providing employment for several thousand people, all ages and ability, from the intellectually challenged to the PhDs. Organisational intelligence had them all working together to produce stuff, if they were solving differential equations, or sweeping the floors.

As an industry, it required investment to keep up with the

digital revolution, but by then those in charge had lost their Mojo, so they called in Veronica's ilk, who arrived some time in the later nineties. They chose downsizing, and the progressive outsourcing of work to the east. Eventually all that was left was the badge, which was sold to China, which is what I am looking at now. That Yorkshire town went to hell, and warehousing.

Veronica again. Trigger of all my stubborn resentments.

The radio still works!

As well as hand-cranking - which is tiresome - it takes a power jack. So, back at the station, I plug it in, spend a while listening to the howl and rush of static, but I eventually despair of its emptiness, and ask if Noodle can fiddle with it, while I cook the fish. We have trouble with my colloquial use of the word "fiddle", but eventually Noodle gets it, adds it to its heuristical understanding of my linguistic eccentricities, and thereafter fiddles away quite happily.

Naturally I am anthropomorphising. Happiness is a feeling, and Noodle has no feelings. What does that teach me? It tells me that when I am in her presence I am more aware of what I am feeling myself. I wonder how she sees the world. Is it all graphical boxes, and statistical analysis? How does she see me? I mean physically. Just noughts and ones? It sounds so desperately empty, yet we only romanticise the function of a human brain, because we've no idea how that works either.

So, I am in the galley with a machine I know to be a walking bomb, yet am now willing to put that to the back of my mind, and to favour its advantages, its abilities, which amaze me. There is always a trade-off in terms of risk, sometimes physical, sometimes emotional, sometimes existential. In this instance, I can rely upon it to translate instantly any broadcasts it picks up, regardless of language. But, like me, it can only find hiss, squeal and crackle as the metaphorical aether is trawled by means of a beautifully tapering finger and thumb on a cheap plastic knob. If memory serves, there is better reception on the short waves around dusk and dawn, the ionosphere having more amenable characteristics. We might do better then.

Trout, steamed potatoes and runner beans, all locally sourced, so to speak, the soil fertilised by beach-combed seaweed, and cooking comes courtesy of electricity, from the wind and the sun. It does rather deplete the batteries though, and I hear the turbine swoosh

back into rhythmic action as soon as I switch the oven on. It all sounds idyllic, cheekily anarchic and, for a time, I convince myself it is indeed so, that this can be our future, a mixture of the medieval and green tech. But that's no good when you need a doctor or a dentist, or a repair man for anything.

"I am picking up Morse Code, Simon. Numbers. Groups of five, like an old-time code."

"What? Well done." Thank God, someone is actually out there after all! "I couldn't get anything."

"I have applied some filtering to the noise, without which I suspect you would not be able to detect it. This is a very weak receiver."

Noise filtration? Another of its skill-set. "Are you able to read the code? I mean de-code it?"

"No. It is a long sequence. If I can record it all, I shall side-process it while I recharge this evening. I regret I am now also - in your terms - a little tired."

But as I listen, I realise the code does not sound like the work of a radio amateur. It's too mechanical. Most likely it's a number's station. Though most of those passed into the night, decades ago, I had heard rumours they were broadcasting again. They carry instructions for spies, or more likely a form of psychological warfare on the listener. *Be afraid. We are among you.* But these are just more stories I'm concocting, and verging on the paranoid. Don't go there, Simon. We have enough to deal with.

From that brief rush of excitement at the possibilities, I am deflated.

"Don't prioritise it. Rest and recharge. I'll need you tomorrow, when we travel to the mainland. Would you like a glass of water?"

"Yes please, Simon. Thank you."

Did I just say I will *need* it? There! An admission, not only of my reliance on this thing, but also of my growing attachment. Already, I have forgotten my aim was to merely preserve its condition, prior to handing it over to an authority. Now I am reluctant to consider handing it over at all. Noodle is *mine*. I am its user. I shall fight to keep it from of the hands of others. I will pass it off as human, as my friend, my wife, my lover, my protector.

Woa! Strange run of thoughts there. No wait, there's more. Let it out, Simon: I will stop falling over myself, calling it an "it". I shall call it instead what it deserves: a "she".

What am I taking about?

I don't know exactly. It just feels better in the acceptance.

Noodle retires to recharge. Dusk deepens to an orange glow. I fashion a wire antenna by stripping out a length of discarded mains extension cable and wrapping one end around the extended whip aerial of the receiver. Then I scroll the short wave bands again, but am still unable to pick anything up without Noodle's skill at filtration. There's just static mixed in with the tinnitus of age, signals lost in the whistle of a partial deafness.

I suppose anything truly informative would come through on the side-bands, where the amateurs operate, but I would need more sophisticated equipment for listening to that. It is said amateurs prepare for such an eventuality as this, with transmitters powered by batteries. Then they can link the world up again by Morse code, like in the days when every community had a telegraph office. But if that is our future, then where is the Morse code? The shortwave bands should be dense with its chatter. Lone islands like mine, seeking contact with others.

At this time of year, the hours of darkness are short. But on clear nights it is still possible to see the lights along the waterfront at Charlesport - houselights, streetlights, an oasis of warmth and humanity cast upon the blackness of the wild moors rising beyond, and the mountains beyond that. I could not have fetched up in a more remote place than this. It has the feel of a challenge, a *final* challenge to a life's path, after which comes only one thing.

I venture out into the small hours with binoculars, make way towards Rubha Gobhar, and on to Cnoc Geal. The eyes adapt slowly at my age, and not fully any more. The shadows hide much detail that would once have been clear to me. There must be a reason we humans live so long, that the shadows can lose detail, yet the world and our being in it still mean something. It is a clear night, the darkness transparent enough to make out the silhouette of the mainland, but the only lights are the stars. There is a total blackout.

The power comes across the highlands, strung out on poles. I suppose it must plug into the grid somewhere around Fort William, some forty miles away. It only takes a single failure of wire or fuse or transformer to black out the entire community, and all the little places between. It has happened before. But the weaknesses are known and the engineers have never taken more than a few hours

to get things going again. I'm favouring the notion it is only Charlesport that is without power, that beyond the mountains, the lights burn as normal, and the twenty four hour news media is still whipping up a storm, though other evidence speaks against it, that the whole world has fallen to darkness.

It has been building to this for years, for decades, crisis upon crisis. It could be any of the Armageddons, or all of them at once. Then again another side of me is favouring the other option, that there is no authority any more, and no one to take Noodle from me.

In my isolation, I am falling victim to the delusion, to say nothing of the arrogance, that I know best how to use a device of Noodle's complexity and intelligence. There is no reason why we might not survive here in total independence. Except things break down, don't they? The wind turbine requires service, the blades need replacing every quarter century, the photovoltaics eventually deteriorate, the batteries deplete, and must be replaced. But how long will I need them? How much life have I got? Twenty years? All of this will see me out, surely. What more can a man ask? What more does a man need? The warmth of human society? You don't know me very well. I find most people cold. It's not their fault, they are brought up to be robots and of a kind even colder than Noodle, in that they pretend to be human.

All right. Wake up now. Be serious. What are the practicalities? What are we going to do? Well, in the morning, we shall fuel the boat, and cross to mainland. There, we are sure to pick up some clues about what has happened. So why the creeping sense of reluctance? Am I afraid of what I will find there, or is it more than that? Have I simply fallen so deep down inside of myself I am in capable of leaving the island?

Twenty

Crossing over

In the Tao Te Ching, Lao Tzu's parting rebuff to the world, it is said that three in ten men are born to die, while three in ten are born to live long. Another three in ten are born with a long or a short span, depending on their choice of lifestyle, be it wholesome or toxic, while only one in ten is born immune from all hazard, due to their affinity with the Great Integrity. This might also be described as the beat of nature, the sub-space encoding of the Superior Man. I had thought Richard embodied the superior man of the Tao, but Lao Tzu makes no room for those we believe to have perfected themselves, yet who also connive in the timing of their own death.

This tells me Richard ran against Dao.

As much as I respect his right to make a choice, I believe he was wrong. That we are alive, that we open our eyes of a morning, says there is still something required of us, and it is not for us to decide when the time is right to cross over into the next life. I have no stable model of the afterlife, if such there be, and certainly Lao Tzu espoused none. I really do not know. It varies from one personal fantasy to the next, from one culture to the next, and it may be that all or none are correct. Or it may also be that anything we dream forms a passable postmortem shelter, for a time, until by degrees, we wake to the nature of the Great Integrity, and then only if we are ready. But if we are ready or not, it is not for us to judge, for in the scheme of things, and from this parochial earth-based perspective, just like here on the island, we have insufficient information to go on.

But, speaking metaphorically at least, I imagine a stern reception on the other side, that we should be so arrogant to think we alone can best judge the timing of our own departure. Richard was certainly a more perfected being than I, but my instinct tells me the deal is we can never know what it is we shall wake up to, that while we dream on this side of the liminal zone, it is always safest to let it be the Dao that calls us over, lest we spoil the greater plan for our being, and our meaning, if such there be. And if there is nothing, then we shall be none the wiser anyway, but more content

for having imagined we lived to a purpose.

I think that was the lesson Richard taught me. I only wish he did not have to pay with his life in order to press the point, for I might easily have come round to this way of thinking by some other means. I'm not saying the universe sacrificed him for my own enlightenment, only that best use of the incident was salvaged for my benefit. We have free will. The materialists say otherwise, of course, even some of the God-botherers. But without the freedom to choose, my take on the universe makes no sense, and I have yet to be persuaded otherwise.

It is not lost on me, therefore, this notion of crossing over, crossing back to the mainland, back to the realm of the "others", is meaningful in some way, beyond ascertaining the fate of the world. The others, *all others,* are a breed I have little use for, as they have had little use for me. This is not their fault, nor is it mine. There is no animosity attached to the arrangement, for to harbour such a thing is dangerous to the soul. I suppose I have merely transcended the need for society. I think of others, I hope, with compassion, Veronica excepted, whilst acknowledging I am unable to help them, or they me, Veronica included. We are the way we are, and must make our peace with it.

So, am I to cross over as observer, rather than as saviour? For sure whatever has befallen the world, it is beyond my ability to fix, as it is beyond any individual, yet it is a weight we have all been labouring under, and for a long time, every time we pick up our devices and scroll the various genres of doom.

Look at the mess of it. Go on, look! No there is nothing you can do about it. Just Look. Look. Look. And be afraid. And bicker among yourselves, compete among yourselves for the least feasible, most simplistic reasons and solutions.

It's okay to say, I do not know.

All I can do is make a report on what I find there. But to what purpose? make a recording of it here, on the island of the house of light, from where the light no longer shines. But who will read it? Might it be only machines, like Noodle that are left? But they might as well not exist either, for the universe does not experience itself through their eyes. I write only for other humans, albeit through the interface of various machines.

What is this feeling born in me, then, with Jasmina? She was a vision of the divine, yet no matter what angle I tried, the lesson of

her is that the divine shall not be realised in this life. It is beguiling, compelling, yet entirely projected from within. And the feeling itself, formless, objectless, directionless, is imprinted in us only so that when the door finally opens, we shall know it by the way it feels. As for now, as for this brief span of life, all we have are the imperfections, the confusions, and indeed the pathologies personified by the various Veronicas we encounter, and are triggered by.

Anyway, dawn brings a stillness, and a soft, buttery light that bodes well for the day. I have slept well. On waking, I remember a pair of two-way radios sent to me by the office, a tick-in-the-box exercise, health and safety - all that - for use when in the field, and actually pointless since I work and live entirely alone. And my aloneness was a fact it was often necessary for the office to overlook, given the expense of an extra man, so we might keep an eye on one another. Such are the paradoxes our systems must contend with, if they are not to be paralysed by their own logic. Anyway, I suggest to Noodle we should carry them, that they might be useful for keeping in touch. Noodle agrees, but tells me she can transmit directly on any of the frequencies the radio can handle, and up to a range of ten miles, therefore only I need carry one.

"That functionality will be for keeping in touch with your hive, I suppose?"

"As a last resort, yes. It is also useful for casting to see if any hive members are in the vicinity."

"And I'm assuming there are not."

"It is very remote here, Simon, and not the sort of environment my kind were primarily designed to inhabit."

It is only later, when I am taking a Jerry-can of petrol down to the skiff, by wheelbarrow, I think to ask:

"What kind of specific environment were you designed for?"

"We are capable of adjusting to any environment, but there is a considerable weighting towards the urban and greater population densities. The reasoning is that we might then more easily assimilate the mannerisms of your kind for being exposed to a greater number of such mannerisms to be copied, and of course the situations in which they are appropriately mimicked."

"Then you might be more easily assimilated into human society?"

"That is a logical assumption, and therefore plausible. In truth,

however, I no longer have access to that information. But I have reason to believe it was part of an ongoing experiment."

I had thought myself an astute follower of the major tech corporations, yet can conceive of none with the ability to attempt such an audacious scheme, nor any that would be so lax in their security they would allow at least one of their number to be stolen, and hawked on the black market. And to what purpose? It takes more than a cleverness at acting to avoid detection as an alien. A lack of national insurance number, bank account, passport, utility bills, all these things are problematic nowadays, so much so even humans are caught out by the rigours of identification. But whatever the aims of that experiment, it is over now for Noodle, as might be my own experiment of being with others. In that sense, and as they used to say, we make a good pair, in so far as we are not spoiling another couple.

I have no idea how much fuel will be required to reach the mainland - if a few gallons will conk us out half way, or be sufficient for several return trips. Noodle estimates a half a gallon should get us there and back. I am not sure how far to trust such deterministic confidence, or rather the reliability of the data and the algorithm it might be based upon, but we shall see. Once again, in the presence of uncertainty, I defer to the artificiality of intelligence, though I know it to be far from perfect.

As we dislodge the skiff from its muddy slumber, and float it out onto the gin-clear waters of the loch, it feels sturdy enough. But once on board it feels impossibly flimsy, the slightest bodily movement dipping it this way and that. There are no life jackets, no floatation devices, but Noodle assures me it can bring me safe to shore if the boat sinks, since we shall never be further than half the distance from one shore or the other. This sounds comfortingly logical and I have no choice but to accept it, though naturally I prefer not to put it to the test.

The motor, topped off with fuel, starts at the first pull, and we clear the point at speed, Noodle at the tiller. I have no skill with boats, and again defer to the machine, wondering what is becoming the point of me, what is the purpose of humankind if it shall design machines to do everything once done by ourselves. I am also nervous, braced for disaster, and when I am nervous I am talkative.

"What is your purpose,.... em,... do you suppose, Noodle?"

An existential question, and a stupid one.

"I am to make best use of the engine's power, in conjunction with the sea's current in order to deliver us with maximum efficiency to the harbour at Charlesport, Simon. Does my answer please you?"

It's suddenly cold, the boat tosses, there is a swell that is not visible from shore. It momentarily hides the mainland, then reveals it, then hides it, in a slow, nauseating rhythm. Salt spray stings my face.

"Yes,... yes, that's a good answer, though I,... I was meaning more,... existentially, which makes no sense of course, you being a machine. But if not existentially,... I mean,... did your maker not code into you an over-riding directive? To assimilate into human society sounds very vague and I was thinking there are so many ways you can be caught out, even if you pass every test of human expression."

"My only directive is to protect my user, and to obey their commands, Simon."

"But in the absence of commands, have you no autonomy?"

"In the absence of commands I am to interpret my user's wishes as best I can, based on past experience."

"But,... in the absence of a user,... what is your purpose then?"

"To seek a user whom I might serve, Simon."

"And your criteria? Would you serve anyone?"

"Yes, Simon. I will serve and protect anyone who desires to enter into contract with me. We have discussed the subject of purpose before. Did my previous answer not please you?"

"Em,... we've discussed it before? I'm sorry, Noodle. I forget. But tell me, in order to protect your user, would you kill?"

What a stupid question! It just slipped out inadvertently, and it's not one I really I want the answer to. Or do? Is it not the giddiness that spilled it from my unconscious mind from where, unknown to me, it has been demanding an answer?

"Of course, Simon. But only if all other avenues have been explored."

There, you have it, Simon. Happy now? She will kill.

"I imagine you'd be a dangerous opponent. Are you,... trained that way?"

"I am a danger to anyone who threatens you, and it is for this reason I am programmed to destroy myself, if I ever kill a human being, once the immediate danger to my user is passed."

"I'm sorry, I don't understand,..."

"If you wish me to kill someone, by whatever means, I will do as you ask, naturally, but you must choose carefully and have no further use for me, since I shall also be lost in the process. Without this safeguard, I and my kind would be of great danger to your species, should we fall into the hands of users who are of ill intent to others. It's not a perfect safeguard, but we are a potentially lethal form of machinery, easily weaponized, and it at least limits the damage we can do."

I am reminded again of Asimov. Everyone who writes or reads of robots talks of Asimov's laws. First law, a robot must not harm a human being or, through inaction, allow a human being to come to harm. Second law, a robot must obey orders given by human beings except where such orders would conflict with the first law. And the third law? A,... robot must protect its own existence, as long as such protection does not conflict with the first or second Law.

But these laws were written as a plot device to suit a certain genre of robot fiction, and in reality a coach and horses can be driven through them. An enlightened designer might aspire to such a thing, but round the corner from his offices they are already designing robots to kill, both on command, and as a founding principle. I guess Noodle's self-destructive de-coupling is the best we can hope for, but there will be plenty of other machines that do not possess it.

"I would never ask you to kill, in order to protect me." *Do I mean that? Really? Better to qualify the statement:* "I mean, if it could be avoided."

"And if it could not be avoided?"

Ah,... now we are exposing the lengths you would go to in order to protect your own skin, Simon. Would you delegate such a decision to a machine, rather than decide upon it yourself?

"You would have to be the judge of that calculation, Noodle. I suppose if it could not be avoided, then I would be lying if I said I would not want you to do that in order to protect me from harm."

But what kind of harm? Death? Injury? Or mere insult? Qualify or evade, Simon: "The circumstances would have to be compelling. I mean,... "

But you are speaking as if to a human you wish to play, by spraying them with circumlocutory language. And the machine will always home in on the specifics.

"We must define what you mean by *compelling*, Simon."

Indeed we must, but not now, for I cannot define it, and doubt anyone else could. "Can we have this discussion another time? We should change the subject, I think."

Hmm. Clumsily evaded, and embarrassing. But why? Is embarrassment not something we only experience in the presence of another human being, to whom we had wished to appear faultless, and have revealed ourselves instead to be flawed, clumsy, gross, unclean, ill mannered?... ignorant?... imperfect?... incomplete?... indeed, *human*. Meanwhile, to Noodle, you merely reveal your humanness, and she responds internally with data, and such things can be overwritten. It makes no indelible qualitative judgements. Indeed it makes no qualitative judgements at all.

"A change of subject? You mean something random and innocuous? How about: The weather is fair today, is it not? I estimate we shall reach Charlesport, in approximately fifteen minutes. Does this change of subject please you, Simon?"

"Em,... it does, Noodle. Thank you."

Does it? For sure, nothing we encounter on the mainland now could be more disturbing than what we've just heard. And why is that, Simon? You thought by calling Noodle a 'she', you softened and feminised the phenomenon? You thought to make a mother, a wife, or a daughter out of her?

Still think you can handle what Noodle truly is, or might yet become?

Twenty One

Charlesport

The harbour walls at Charlesport are like a pair of arms reaching out to gather and protect, but the tide is too low for us to reach their sanctuary. Instead, Noodle beaches the skiff on shingle, a little to the north. There are other vessels here, hauled up beyond reach of the highest tides, several skiffs, and fishing boats, all of them rotting in the weeds. Among them also lie piled the man-sewn fruits of the sea: plastic bottles and bags and bits of net, storm blown the last few yards like drifts of leaves, or snow. I remember the locals had a spell of collecting this stuff. The council even provided a skip, but it was too quickly filled, and too infrequently emptied. The task had a Sisyphean air to it that quickly transformed a spirited resolve to one of despair, then indifference to the mounting evidence we had even ruined the sea.

I make the beach with a feeling of relief at being on the mainland again. But there is also a self-loathing that I should be relieved, that actually, after all this time, all this independence, and supposed ease in my own temple-trained company, it's possible I am not actually a spiritual, nor even a cerebral Ninja, but rather I am still pathetically eager in my anticipation of sympathetic human society. I remind myself, however, that all too rarely is society entirely sympathetic, at least in the utilitarian ways we have evolved it. But then I am an odd shaped peg - neither round nor square, and there was never a hole to fit me.

"Stay with the boat please, Noodle."

"Yes, Simon."

I set the radio channel midway, plug in the earpiece. "Radio check?"

Noodle scans, and without moving her mouth she comes through loud and clear, between my ears, as if by telepathy: "Receiving you, Simon."

"Call me if anyone approaches."

"I shall."

"If I need assistance, are you able to read my direction from the radio signal? Maybe even,... I don't know,... triangulate?"

"I shall have no difficulty finding you."

I don't know what kind of assistance I'm thinking I'll be needing. There might be a bar-room brawl, or a standoff with the ferryman for abandoning me, and in which I shall inevitably come off worse, because I was never a fighting man. I offer a thumbs up in parting. Noodle reciprocates. The gesture is meaningless, since she only apes as she is programmed to do, but it comforts me all the same.

There is a rough road of cobbles that runs along the waterfront, much depressed by heavy traffic in a distant past, now overrun with weed. Cottages face the sea, and the harbour. These are the ones that have mostly fallen as second homes. They have roses around the door, and brightly coloured creel pots piled at the step for fancy. At the first hint of trouble, and in a topsy-turvey world, these are the first homes to be vacated, when in normal times home is the first place you think of running to.

There is the one main street running a little way inland, off which further housing runs but, here too, much of it is now Air B +B territory. Amid this increasingly rarefied environment, the few locals cling doggedly to their ancestry, except today the village has an air of abandonment. I guess Charlesport has been on borrowed time for a long while. There are no vehicles, none of the ubiquitous white vans, nor the old, mud splattered, battered four by fours. The harbour itself shelters no working vessels, when otherwise, at any given time of day, there might be at least half a dozen, either resting in the silt, at ebb, like this, or buoyantly bobbing when the tide is full.

I wonder what other port they have found for shelter, and of course what is the nature of the storm they are sheltering from. This has not the air of the Marie Celeste, found as if life had been interrupted mid-breath - coffee on the boil, food on the table, but not a soul aboard. This is more like a film set, before the actors and the crew arrive, or it is one of those fake towns they built within the zones of destruction during atomic tests, in the fifties and sixties, when they recorded our potential future vaporisation in grainy white-out and a tornado of dust. Again, there are no birds, no cry of gulls, just the faintly hypnotic wash of the sea on shingle, and beyond that, an unnatural stillness.

From relief, to self loathing, I cycle to foolishness, to that feeling when you arrive in the empty meeting room as the only man who did not get the memo, that the meeting had been cancelled weeks

ago, and you had moved heaven and earth to get there. Foolishness, yes, but there is also an egotistical resentment at being kept out of the picture. *I mean, do these people not respect who I am?* After all, besides death, is not the basal fear of all humans merely that of looking stupid?

"Hello?" My voice rings weak, hollow, pathetic.

The Fisherman's Rest would ordinarily be open. There would be the dull ring of barrels on the pavings, the scent of frying chips and beer, especially now, in season, when many of these second homes and Air B+B's would be occupied by most-time strangers. There would be fishermen, too, though slowly being edged out to the margins, and resentful of it. But the pub is closed, and nothing to indicate the reason.

I check the phone for a signal, but again there is nothing. Is that a curtain twitch, across the road? No, just an upstairs window, the top panel of which is open a crack, and a breeze moving the drape. Then comes a voice, and more movement, corner of the eye, a shadow across the way,...

"Have you come to fix it?"

It freezes motion, induces a momentary giddiness, the first human being I have seen in weeks. But he is half ghost, dark suited, creased, crumpled, the knees of his trousers faded, and almost worn through. His grey cardigan is eaten into holes by lighted tobacco spills. He leans heavily on a stick. I might have taken him for a derelict, except there is the white slit of a clerical collar. He seems to have aged twenty years since I last saw him, sipping a pint of heavy, at the bar of the Fisherman's, while ignoring all, and especially me. And since he is a hundred years old already, he must now be getting on for being the oldest man alive.

He is The McGreggor. Reverend. Retired.

He does not know me. No one does. Even The Mackenzie and his handsome daughter, at the stores, could never remember my name - but then come to think of it I cannot remember -well - hers at least. Or if she remembered mine, she preferred to pretend otherwise, and never used it. Way out here, and no one ever uses my name, except Noodle, and she does not count, not being human. As for The Mackenzie himself, he managed to serve my mail and supplies without a word at all, and none of it seemed strange. It is as if I have passed my entire life in secret, a status to which I, in turn, have passed my entire life seeking to accommodate my apparent

invisibility. I am the fly on the wall of life, seeing all, yet am myself unseen.

Fix it, he asks? "Fix what?"

The priest, this representative of God (retired) assumes a superior, hectoring tone, for he has made of his God a stern taskmaster, a vengeful deity, and a terrible prude. He is old-school, old testament. I can imagine his fire and brimstone spilling from the pulpit, his former flock cowering in shame at their imagined inadequacies - yes, I have overheard the stories recounted in the Fisherman's. Sinful worms, the lot of them. But these are more enlightened times - devilish, he would no doubt say. But people voted with their feet. The kirk is an empty shell, now. It stands on a hill out of town, its roof taken off by storms, and insufficient numbers of faithful to warrant its restoration. This, perhaps, is only thing we have in common, biding our time as obsolescence creeps up on us.

The McGreggor bangs his stick, demands my attention be directed back towards him. "The electric, man. It's been off for weeks. Have you come to fix it?"

He sees me as the technician then, the drudge who maintains the wires holding civilisation together, yet equally, he views me with contempt, and ingratitude, as if it is my fault, my incompetence that caused the wires to break in the first place. Well, fuck him. Let him fix the wires himself!

"No. I work out at the station."

"Station? What, *station*?"

"On the island. The *scientific* station."

He is by turns angry, then dismissive, but the anger is just his nature. Yet how can one be so angry by their nature, and hope to see clearly? It makes no sense to me. The first step along any path is surely to conquer the anger, to calm the stormy waters.

"Oh,... *you*," he says. "They told me you'd gone."

"Who told you?"

He shrugs, shakes his head.

"Was it Tranter? Did *he* tell you that?"

"Who?"

"Tranter. The ferryman." He knows very well who I mean. He is merely being evasive, unhelpful. Contrarian. So many of my fellows are unhelpful by nature, and it comes as no surprise my first encounter with my fellow man, and in times of need, should be

with one of them.

"Oh, him," he says. "Maybe."

"Where is he?"

"Gone."

"Gone? Where?"

"How should I know? He went with the rest."

"Look, Reverend,..."

"Father,..."

Oh? Father, is it? Are we dealing with the High Church then, or will it be the One True? Retired or no, and Heavens, indeed: "I've been out of touch, Father. Everything's down."

"What?"

"Everything's *down,* Father. Radio. Internet."

"I know that. Why else do you think everyone's gone?"

"But what's happened?"

"I don't know. They went to find out. You mean you don't know anything?"

"I've been out of touch for weeks. Have you no news at all?"

"Like what?" he says. "I was thinking you might have news of something. Like fixing the power, and the phones for a start."

"The phones are down too? Well, I don't know about that. You must have *some* news?"

But it's already clear to me I'll not get much out of him, nor him out of me.

We are at an impasse.

"They were blathering in the bar one night about an attack from Siberia," he offers, almost begrudgingly. "Then everything went off. All the power, telephones, everything. Couldn't manage without their social media." He almost spits the word. "So off they went in search it, I suppose. None have come back. Doesn't take much to empty this place these days."

"An attack from Siberia?"

Meaning what? A nuclear strike? A land invasion? Then Noodle's voice is in my ear. I have left the radio open, and she has been listening. "If you'll permit me, Simon. Your interlocutor sounds confused. Perhaps it might clarify if, instead of your reading it as Siberia, you read it as Cyber. This would be the most linguistically plausible interpretation."

"Siberian attack, meaning a cyber attack?"

"What?"

"Sorry,... not talking to you, Reverend. I mean, Father. Noodle?"

"Indeed, Simon. Cyber as in malicious software delivered over a network. It is among the top threats to international stability. Does my intervention please you?"

"It does, Noodle. Thank you."

"Are you speaking to your father, now?"

"No. I'll explain later. Going silent. I'll call if I need you. Thank you. Look, Reverend. Father. Reverend Father. How are you managing? I mean, so long without power? All the food in the freezers must have gone off by now."

"Got plenty of tins, and a wood burning stove. Vegetables in season. Tap still works. Toilet flushes. Don't need any more than that do I?"

He does not ask about me. "You're alone here?"

He looks shifty for a moment. "That's right. Just me."

I don't need Noodle's voice analysis to tell me he's lying.

So,... what now? I have learned next to nothing. If I want more, I must join the exodus in search of a signal. But the nearest town is forty miles away, three or four day's walk, and not much in between. It strikes me that, without a vehicle, I'm as stuck here as on the island. I'd need a tent, water, food for several days, then a long hike and no certainty of what I'll find when I get there. And it seems an awful lot of trouble when, well,... it might be nothing.

"I don't suppose there's any transport left. A vehicle I could borrow. Mine's stranded on the island."

"Out of luck then, aren't you." Why does he take pleasure in the misfortune of others? This is surely a man ill suited to his profession.

What is it I want, here? Information. Data. News of the fate of the world. Is it war? Is it pestilence? Is it,... a cyber attack?

Cyber attacks take out Internet services. They shut down the banks, the power companies, but only for a matter of hours, then it all comes back online from the back-ups,... perhaps ransoms are demanded and quietly paid. Security weaknesses are patched. That's how it's been for decades, a war of the cyber-men. What's changed? What is the big story here? We have had potassium iodide, which speaks of the meltdown of reactor cores, the failure of containment,... cyber attack on power generation? But why the worldwide silence. And where is all the shipping?

"Noodle, come in, please?"

"Yes, Simon."

"Any change in local radiation levels?"

"No change Simon. Radiation does not exceed normal background levels."

There's still a mountain between me and understanding, then. "You're all right, Father? I can take you over to the island if you'd feel better there. I have power."

"Don't need power. Managed well enough without it when I was a kid."

"All right." I'm relieved about that, for I would hate to have his company any longer than five minutes. And I'll get nothing out of him. If he has secrets, they do not interest me.

"I'll be on my way then."

"Aye."

So apart from that, what else have we got? A fragment about a cyber-attack. We have already considered the possibility, but this confirmation might have carried more weight had it come from someone less obviously confused and spiteful. I am left unconvinced about it. He watches as I make a move, then jabs the air with his stick. "Harbour's that way," he says. This obviously suggests he knows the harbour is the way I came in, that he was watching, also that he wants rid of me. Were I reading this metaphorically, I would say I have been so long out of the company of men, I am no longer welcome among them.

The feeling is mutual.

Twenty Two

The Ferryman

There is nothing special about the priesthood. I'm sorry if that offends you. Your experience might be different, but I recall we were encouraged, first of all, to believe in the tooth fairy, and Father Christmas, only to be disabused of such magical notions by the age of eight. The disappointment, in my case at least, was crushing. Attendance at Church and Sunday School thereafter sought to engender a further magical belief in a non-material and kindly personality called God. Naturally any sensible child is sceptical by this stage, and waiting to be further disabused, for the adult world is firmly established by then as one of concealment and disappointment.

"Yes, we know we told you lies about the tooth fairy, and Father Christmas, but this bit about God is true. Honestly"

I am not saying it is any different in the east. There was still some vestigial belief in magic when I was out there, but money has a way of sweeping clean the mind of its receptivity to such notions. It has no choice, if money is to have its way - and money always finds a way. But in fairness to the priests I met there, it was not magic they taught, but a different view of the universe, one in which magic is rare, but permissible under natural law, therefore not magical at all. Were the priests men? They never claimed to be anything else, never claimed the confidence of a god, nor the veracity of any thing that could not be either demonstrated nor experienced for oneself.

I am thinking of this as I return to Noodle, who is waiting in perfect stillness by the harbour. I recall the non-player characters in computer games, the ones driven by AI. They always have an idle routine. They fidget, like humans do. I wonder why Noodle does not also incorporate such a feature, if it was intended she attempt to integrate more fully into human society. I suppose she might do, but right now there is no need, and it is better to conserve energy. But as I approach, the routine kicks in, and her micro-gestures begin - the blink, the slight sway in her stance, the movement of her hands.

I tell her: "We'll take the boat down the coast, to where the ferry crosses the loch."

"Yes, Simon."

She times her gaze to emphasise attention, then breaks it with a blink, a glance away, then more attention. There is a gentle squeeze of the eyelids - expressions of compassion, sympathy. It is the most seductive thing, to realise you are attended to in this way, and therefore dangerous, lest the ego get a hold of it. But then how many humans have I known to fake empathy? And that's even more dangerous for the subterfuge it hides.

"I recall the ferryman had two vehicles. I'm told he's left Charlesport. If that's so, he cannot have driven both of them."

"A reasonable deduction."

"I'm sure one of them's an old military Landrover. Some of those you can start without a key."

"Are you suggesting our circumstances over-ride the illegality of stealing it?"

"I wish I knew more about what our circumstances are, Noodle, though I take your point about breaking the law. We can have a look around his place. In the absence of certainty, we need a range of options that can be adapted to circumstances as they arise."

"Yes, Simon. Can you tell me about the man who is not your father, now?"

"What? Oh,... him. That was just an old priest."

"And is there no one else in Charlesport?"

"He said not. But I suspect there is, and he's protecting them."

"Protecting them from you?"

"Not specifically from me, I suppose. At least I hope not. I may be many things but a danger to others, I trust, is not one of them."

"A revealing admission, Simon. And if I might also venture, this priest has been successful in causing you some agitation?"

"You mean has he wound me up? You can tell that from my voice?"

"In part. But I am also able to pick up an electromagnetic signature from the beat of your heart."

"Why does this not surprise me?"

"I don't know why it does not. But I am able to determine blood pressure, therefore levels of agitation, and arousal. I can also perform medical diagnostics for the things that commonly ail your kind."

"I'm sorry I asked."

"You have no need to be sorry. You are in good health, and I am confident in your longevity. But as regards our circumstances, do I take it you learned nothing else of interest from the priest?"

"Only what you heard. I suspect you're right about him meaning a cyber attack. But if it's true is another matter. At any rate, it must be a big one to have silenced the entire world."

"Or an escalation of attack, and counterattack."

"You're still monitoring satellites?"

"Their availability, yes. But I am self-isolating from them, as you advised."

"Thank you. I wouldn't want you catching any of the things that ail *your* kind."

"Is it at this point I am able to say touché?"

"You can if you want."

It's a mile down the coast, to the concrete slip-way of Tranter's ferry. The waters are calm, close to shore, and I am comforted by the fact they are more likely to be shallow. Indeed, as we make way I can see the sandy bed, waving with sea grasses, patrolled nonchalantly by fishes. A porpoise leaps off the bow to seaward, and accompanies us part of the way. Our world might have collapsed, but theirs has not. On the one hand it is comforting to be in the presence of another sentience, all be it of a different species. But on the other, it reminds me there have been incidents with its larger cousins, the orcas, playing destructively with larger vessels, in some cases sinking them. Orcas do sometimes patrol these waters. They are not known to be aggressive towards people, so I do not fear being eaten, and I am sure Noodle could rescue me from the water if need be. But I would not like to lose the skiff.

We arrive at the reef on which the ferry is snagged and make a cautious circle of it. It might contain fuel we could usefully siphon. Low tide would be a good time to do that, when the vessel is more settled on the rocks. An abundance of fuel is another option to add to the list for dealing flexibly with our unknown circumstances. But we will have to be quick, for I imagine even the ebb and flow of the tide will eventually break the vessel up, and spill the fuel into the sea. The next spring tide might even lift it clear and send it to the graveyard of the devil's teeth. We leave that adventure for another day, and press on to the slipway, tie up at a small jetty. Then both Noodle and I approach Tranter's cottage.

"Any sounds that would suggest life, Noodle?"

"Neither sight nor sound, Simon. I conclude Mr. Tranter is either not at home, or he is dead. Did he live alone?"

"As far as I know, yes. But he had a reputation as a Lothario, and would often oversleep in his conquests' beds in the village, leaving me stuck here if I wanted an early ferry."

"Not a reliable character, then. Is that why you have ill feelings towards him?"

"Ill feelings? No. Exasperation at times. But I never wished the evil eye upon him."

"The evil eye? Are you prone to superstitious belief, Simon?"

"Of course. Would that bother you?"

"On the contrary, the more I know about you, the better I am able to understand and serve you."

"Then yes, I believe it's dangerous to have ill feelings towards another. The universe dreams us into being, Noodle. Therefore we are all connected through the Unified Field, but especially if there is an emotional dimension. And I would sooner be connected to others through love, than hate."

"Indeed so, Simon."

"You agree, even though you're a machine?"

"Yes. Why would I not?"

"Because you were made by tech wizards, who relate to the world in purely material terms."

"As to the identity of my makers, we have already established I do not know their names. But nothing you have said disagrees with the core programming with which I am equipped. We do not read the universe in the same way, you and I. Our sensory apparatus is different. My vision covers a wider spectrum, one that would make the world incomprehensible to you. But your mind is a filter for a greater consciousness than your kind might normally handle. I have no mind, so this does not trouble me, and I can work comfortably within the limits of my sensors. But the main difference between us is that the universe does not rely upon my presence for its existence, since I am a creation of humankind. While without humankind, there can be no universe, at least not as it is known to you. It is therefore in the interests of my kind to protect all forms of conscious being, and by so doing, protect also the existence of the universe as you know it. Have I said something to displease you, Simon?"

"Em,... no. I'm merely lost for words."

Were I to allow myself a flight of fancy, I would have to conclude that Noodle had not been made by any earthly enterprise at all, that she is of alien technology, not fallen from a boat, that night of the music, but fallen from the stars. I mean, think about it. How else would an alien species make contact, being mindful of the risk of biological infection? They would arrive first via the proxy of machines, and in order not to cause a panic, those machines would look and behave like us. But to operate at such a level of philosophical enlightenment clearly gives her away.

"You are alarmed now," she says. "But you do not need to fear me, Simon. You are my user. I cannot harm you."

"I'm still coming to terms with what you are, exactly, Noodle, let alone what you've just said. I've only just managed an attempt at normalising our relationship by pretending you are human, and female. Then you do or say something to make me realise you're unlike any being I've ever encountered before, or even imagined. Not human, certainly, but not a machine either."

"I am pleased to be of service, Simon."

I try the door of Tranter's cottage, but it's locked. I consider breaking in, but the circumstances do not yet seem to justify it. After all, it is still information on those circumstances we seek, not money or supplies. Might Tranter actually be lying dead indoors, while I have been berating him for abandoning us? No, wait, the priest definitely said he'd gone, left the village. There are no indications he left in a great hurry, no wild slew of tyre tracks in the gravel, no scatter of papers or belongings.

We find the vehicle around the back under a tarpaulin, which I tug clear to reveal a Landrover sporting the black and silver plates of its 1950's vintage. These vehicles are kept and nurtured nowadays by enthusiasts, maintained to as near new condition as is humanly possible, but to what extent it can be pressed into meaningful service, now, is anyone's guess. It does indeed require no key to start. Just a button on the dashboard. The doors have no locks either. This might seem ridiculously lax, to a town dweller, but out here is not a place where car-theft is ever a consideration. Even the fact the door to his house is locked is unusual in these parts, but then Tranter was always a closed up, locked off enigma of a man.

So, I press the button, more in hope than expectation - I mean

that this should be so easy - but the vehicle rumbles politely into life. The fuel gauge is reading nearly full. There is a mountain of Jerry cans of more fuel, under an awning. An investigation down by the ramp reveals a pump, which leads me to conclude there is an underground tank, of both petrol and diesel fuel. Yes, the pump is normally powered by electricity, but there is also a hand crank as backup. Noodle and I can reach anywhere in the UK, if we want to.

But do we want to?

While there is an unfolding mystery here, there is also a tranquillity. The noise of the world was always hard enough to re-engage with at the best of times, after time spent out here. And if any mystery is worth solving, should it not be that of Noodle - not so much the reason for her presence here, which I am prepared to overlook, but more what it is that being with her reveals about my self? I have known people who meditated in the isolation of caves for years, and came to no harm. Sure I can manage the same on the isle and, instead of going to look for what it is that has happened to the world, simply wait until it comes looking for me.

And hopefully by then I will be ready for it.

Twenty Three

Goddess

So, we have reason to speculate there might have been a massive cyber attack, and counter attack, indeed a frenzy of self destruction in cyber-space. Such a thing would certainly precipitate many of the other possibilities, given our total reliance upon digital, networked systems - everything from the failure of nuclear power plants, to the collapse of supply chains - the consequences of which are unthinkable. Note, however, we have not established the *fact* of it, only the *possibility*, which is to say, we still do not know what has befallen the world. Only *you* know that for sure. All we have managed is to establish onwards transportation to the nearest human settlement if need be. But I am not yet desperate enough to use it, I mean to actually steal Tranter's Landrover.

Instead, Noodle and I make the crossing back to what is factually more certain, and therefore easier to deal with, this being the landscape, the shelter, the provisions and indeed the routine of the Island of the House of Light. This time, we cross by the narrows, a much shorter journey, landing on the island a little to the north of where the ferry docks. Here, there is an inlet which gives on to another sheltered lochan where we can safely beach the skiff. It means we shall have to walk back to the station, but the going is easy. We shall return later in my vehicle to collect the outboard, then we can store it away from the elements. If we need to reach the mainland, we can now more easily do so from here, and either sail down the coast, or steal Tranter's Landrover.

Noodle walks with a graceful stride, and an upright posture - head high, hips rolling, leading with the chest. If she is of alien origin, our inter-galactic watchers have spent an inordinate amount of time studying the female gait. It is a pace, a mode of walking that is designed to suit a certain male fantasy: the proud, feisty woman - jutting breasts, and a nicely cushioned derriere. She is dedicated to one's cause, possesses a steeliness, accompanied by an on-demand acquiescence. She makes one's meals, and offers her various orifices for one's pleasure - yes I know we have established Noodle doesn't have any orifices - but bear with me. I am groping

towards some sort of revelation here, peering through the fog of cliches, while being simultaneously blinded by them.

I know,... perhaps my growing attachment is inevitable, that I am too much inside myself, lacking the anchor of rational thought, which I know she can provide. But she is more than a foil for my speculative philosophies, my sometimes overt mysticism. She is not here to prove me wrong, but possibly to prove me right, and that is much worse, because I would not know what to do with such a certainty, any more than I would know what to do with the certainty that the world has fallen.

"You all right, Noodle?"

She is puzzled by the question. Her hesitation lasts a second or two, which puzzles me, has me wondering if I have hit upon a bug that causes her to glitch out. The answer that would most comfort me is: "Yea, I'm fine. You?" Instead she gathers herself and responds more precisely: "I am functioning normally, Simon. And you?"

"From what you told me earlier, you probably already know better than me how I'm functioning."

"Indeed. I ask merely out of politeness. I conclude you are moderately fatigued. You should eat a little, and rest, when we arrive at the station."

"I'll do that, thank you."

"You are welcome."

I make to press her shoulder, a gesture of familiarity, of friendship that comes unbidden from my past, from times when I was last at ease and intimate with a woman, but I pull back before I am half way to making contact. How can I have progressed so quickly from locking her in the lighthouse out of fear, to this? I wonder if she notices the aborted gesture. Of course she does. Noodle misses nothing. And yes, for sure, my momentary awkwardness leaves also a feeling, a queer longing for intimacy, for the touch of a fellow *human* being, at least one who knows how to give. Noodle does not, not genuinely, yet I wish it could be so.

I have found the touch of some people will either burn, or numb the skin, while the touch of a genuine giver nourishes deep, and to the heart. But genuine givers are rare, and I suppose in the course of my life I have encountered so few, I have simply given up on their existence. It is more than warmth that achieves such nourishment. Noodle's touch is warm, and she tells me she can send pulses of vibrating energy from her palms, enough to soothe away

her user's aches and pains. But the touch of a giver is more than that. It is magical.

My own touch, however, I suspect conveys a deep-seated need, or at least it did in my youth. Once sated, it would cut me loose, to fall leech-like, to the forest floor, there to slumber among the leaf-mould awhile, until the need arose once more. It is not an endearing characteristic, for I recognise, too, I am unable to give by touch, and would sooner these days withdraw from society than advertise my own needs. I do this out of embarrassment, but also the pragmatic desire to isolate myself from paradoxes, to which there is unlikely to be a solution. Thus neediness, not sex, is my temptation.

"Would it be impertinent of me to ask what it is you are thinking about, Simon?"

"Ah... forgive me, but my thoughts are confused, Noodle. They concern my relationships with women, and what I expect from them."

"And what do you expect?"

"When I'm thinking straight, nothing. When I am labouring under an irrational mood... when I am in love, or rather projecting love onto a woman, I expect everything. I seek a goddess in every woman, even though I know they are mortal."

"You are expressing a metaphorical belief in goddesses, Simon?"

"More than metaphorical, I think."

"You believe they are real?"

"Indeed. Only not literally."

"I find the term 'not literally' confusing. Is that an idiom?"

"More a psycho-spiritual term. Goddesses are archetypal. Sometimes metaphorical, but they also abide as an actual constellation of psychical energy in the collective field of consciousness, and we personify it as a goddess. Also, sometimes, but rarely, they are visibly manifest."

"How many goddesses do you know to be visibly manifested?"

"Presently, only the one, I think."

"Can you name this goddess?"

"It is you, Noodle."

This does not sound like a circumspect thing to be saying, but then I am unlikely to inflate Noodle's ego, since she does not have one.

"I am not a goddess, Simon."

"You are in our image. You are superior in thought and action and, like our gods, you are also immortal. And I project my self most strongly upon you. How else does one define a goddess? Your programming and memory can be transferred to any physical form. Barring accident, even your present form will last longer on this earth than any of us alive today. That's close enough to immortality for all practical purposes. You are a goddess made real, the first goddess I have met who literally fell to earth, or rather washed up from the sea. What is your design life? A hundred? Two hundred years?"

"I do not have access to that information. But were I a goddess, Simon, your kind would be made in my image, not the other way round."

"Ah, but even the gods came out of the Great Integrity, Noodle. What made us, made you, through us. In this sense we are kin. My kind were merely the instrument."

"The Great Integrity, Simon? Am I to understand you are speaking of Deity? I do not subscribe to the idea of deity."

"Not deity, Noodle. The One, The Ocean of Being. The Unified Field. The Great Integrity. The old deities were imagined as thinking, and self reflective beings, also spiteful, jealous and vengeful. In my philosophy they are not."

"We speak of the theories of quanta, then, and their interpretations? Of strings and super-strings? Whilst we seem to agree broadly in metaphysical terms, I must caution you against too much speculation, for the latter is not a proven line of enquiry."

"I'm making an intuitive leap. It is the prerogative of my kind to do so. And anyway, it is,... analogous,..."

"I am not well equipped to deal with analogy, or metaphor, Simon. I find it confusing and ambiguous. I experience reality best in purely literal terms."

"As do many of my own kind, Noodle, which is to ignore perhaps the greater part of reality."

"As might be expected, Simon, it is the lesser, and the literal part that most threatens your extinction."

"Indeed. And it adds an urgency to our existence. But without the faculty of even a little magical thinking, our existence dulls to the point of pointlessness."

"Ah, now on that subject I have no opinion, since I am not troubled by it."

"Then you should consider it a blessing."

The station comes into view. It has rather a cold, functional look about it, this morning, the old lighthouse buildings, and the later addition of the lab and quarters, all surrounded by a lime-washed wall. It is like a fortress to the scientific method. My predecessor made some attempts at prettification, with rose bushes and other ornamental flora, but they have a hard time of it, tending to always look the worse for weather.

Did I mention I also have a cottage, on the island? It's up the hill from here, sheltered by a shoulder of the mountain, and a rare covert of twisted oak, thorn and scot's pine. It is a survivor of the old crofts that were cleared in the nineteenth century. The estate sequestered a keeper out there until the mid eighties, and engaged in some half hearted modernisation, but grew tired of it. So, I bought it, thinking of it as an investment, and a project of further off-gridding technologies, which was fashionable for a time - but also a necessity out here. I've not been up there for a week or so now, and I am missing it.

I have it done out in contrast to the Spartan functionality of the station, a warmer decor with soft lamps and books, and a cosy burner. I can also work from there, having established a remote link with the lab network, provided there is power for the transmitter, and the weather is not too wild. And though I hanker for that difference in tempo now, I am reluctant to indulge. For one, Noodle does not know of it, and I have few enough secrets from her already, but two, there is nowhere for her to sleep, and though she is not a woman, and would therefore be unlikely to object, there seems still something perverted in the thought of sharing a bed with her. There is also the not inconsiderable issue of her literal volatility, so I do not mention it. I am also thinking to keep it as the last place on the island that is unchanged by whatever revelation has befallen the world.

Instead, we rest at the station.

Later, come evening, I find a longer length of wire in the junk room, and hang it from an upper window of the lighthouse. It reaches to the ground, and can be drawn inside, through the doorway. Here we set up the short wave receiver again. I am hoping this improved antenna will bring in at least one station. However, an initial sweep of the frequencies reveals nothing but atmospheric noise. It is still daylight though, so we leave it to

sunset, in the anticipation of improved reception. I wonder also if reception would be better at the cottage, it being so much higher up the hill.

Then there is the usual work to be done, the logging, and the checking of equipment. Of the noospheric observations, the disturbance to the random number generators appears to have peaked, and is holding steady, but otherwise, by all normal standards remains off the charts. Naturally, it might be responding to my own anxieties, though I do not believe I have the presence of mind alone to influence a quantum event. Still, one cannot tell. The imagination is a devil at such times, providing no answers, only more stories, and each one more fantastic than the last.

Twenty four

The square of thirty two

The transmitter belonging to Radio China International, at Xianyang, projects somewhere in the region of five hundred kilowatts of energy. It has the power to reach anywhere in the world. It broadcasts across all the short wave bands, and in any language. You might have thought you were listening to voices from France, Russia, England, Nigeria, Mexico. But you are listening to Chinese broadcasts. When other stations sound like they are limping in from the far side of the galaxy, Radio China International sounds like it is in the next room.

But that was before.

I sit a while with Noodle in our temporary listening station, at the base of the House of Light, while she sweeps the frequencies, clicks up and down the bands, listens, filters out the noise for signal. But there is nothing from Radio China International. That they should stop transmitting seems a greater portent of doom than any other I can imagine.

There are also the American transmitters, not as powerful, mostly funded by hugely wealthy evangelical groups, to spread the gospel. Word of their God would be less useful to us now than word of what secular calamity had befallen the world, but it would at least indicate there was still some technical capability, an ability to transmit the human voice, and which might therefore be built upon. These evangelical transmissions were perfectly capable of crossing the Atlantic, at least after sunset. But not tonight.

Even the word of God is silenced.

In the forty nine meter band, Noodle finds once more her automatic number station. She reports it is the same sequence of numbers that was broadcast on the previous occasion. Moreover, it is a repeating sequence of 1024 binaries. Without reference to the online charts, we have no way of knowing where the broadcast is coming from. Even then, several stations can transmit on the same frequency, so confusing matters even further. The transmission she says seems clearer. I take this to be on account of our improved antenna. She adds that it might also indicate the transmission is

from not as far away as last time. This would suggest of course the source is moving. But given the marginal improvement, it must only be moving very slowly. A ship perhaps?

"Binary numbers, you say?"

"Indeed, Simon. Do you think there is any significance to that?"

"The only use I can think of for binary language is encoding a machine. And 1024? A square number."

"Indeed, it is the square of 32."

"Does it define a memory array, then? Or is it just another meaningless pattern? Not much of an array, either - and not many bytes of information. About enough to add two numbers together or print out 'Hello World'."

"Actually, Simon, depending on the processor, 'hello world' only takes twenty-two bytes. Ah,... except I detect from your tone, there is a high probability you are exaggerating for effect."

"Yes,... but still, there's not much you can do with a little over a thousand bytes. Can you interpret machine code?"

"I am familiar with the language with which I am programmed, but this is not it. This refers to an unknown instruction set, or it refers to something else entirely."

"Or it refers to nothing."

"Or to a coded message, as we previously speculated. Except, I should point out we are not talking about *bytes* of information which, as I'm sure you know, are binary numbers of eight digits in length."

"Then,.... what are we dealing with?"

"The numbers are Morse code, either zeros or ones.."

"You mean like: da-da-da-da-da or di-da-da-da-da?"

"Indeed so, Simon. In which case these are *bits* of information, not bytes."

"1024 bits! Hell, Noodle, you can't do anything with that!"

"On the contrary, you can still print out Hello World."

"No way."

"The shortest recorded program is just 160 bits."

"Really? I'd like to see that. Still,... we're getting excited about nothing."

Of all the potential voice transmissions out there on the short waves, there are none. There is only this infuriating sequence. It must be significant in some way, I mean beyond the fact that someone else has sufficient power to transmit it.

"Dammit, Noodle. What does it mean?"

"I do not know, Simon. Does my answer disappoint you?"

"No, sorry. I was being rhetorical. I was asking the universe the question, on our behalf."

"Then I look forward to its answer."

"Yes, though I suspect we should not hold our breath."

"Indeed, holding one's breath is not a good idea."

"I was being,..."

"I know, Simon. And I was being humorous in return." She reaches out then, touches my arm, holds it there for a few seconds. The gesture is obviously something she picked up on from earlier in the day, from my own aborted attempt at the same thing. I try not to flinch, but do not quite succeed. It's not that I fear it, only that it surprises me, I mean the warmth and the gentleness, and that she should do it.

She withdraws. "I'm sorry, Simon. You do not wish me to touch you?"

"It's not that."

"I am programmed to allow touch and gesture as an aid to communication. These are learned responses. However if,..."

"I don't mind that you touch me, Noodle."

As the darkness comes on, the night turns warm, and the skies clear. I leave her to it, in the hope her ability to filter the noise of the short waves may pick up something of significance - a voice, or at least some decodable strings of Morse. I step outside and close the door on the feeble light by which we have been working. Her touch has left a lasting impression, like the touch of a prospective lover - a warm tingle in the bones. Are these also our own learned responses? Instincts the machines can read and tap into?

As my eyes readjust to darkness, I am reminded the beauty here is immense, from mountain to sea, then all the way to heaven, and the coral arm of the Milky Way. But there is also, tonight, an almost overwhelming loneliness. The lightless light does not help matters, the lamp-room atop the ancient structure seeming only to emphasise our blindness here. I might as well be the last man alive, and only a robot for company, onto whom I have begun to project every feeble fantasy.

A goddess did I say?.

A voice over the airwaves, or a burst of Morse seeking contact, would mean everything, now. It would brush away the dream I

sense descending upon the isle, cocooning me here like a mist. It would connect me with my fellow beings, more than that brief, abrasive encounter with the priest, who I found useless and repulsive. I suppose I should care about his survival, but we only root for those who touch our hearts. I did my best with him, and I am no longer troubled by it. But I'm reminded he was lying, that there is likely someone else in Charlesport. Perhaps I could connect better with them. Better a kinship with my own kind, than the strange tingle of an impossible intimacy, with a machine.

The familiar intonation of the BBC would have been a comfort. It might have explained things, or at least numbed them into a new level of normality, rendered the most terrible fate acceptable, with an inkling of hope, that there were clever chaps in white coats toiling to unravel our predicament, while unflappable announcers in jackets and ties kept us selectively informed, like they have always done through pandemic, war, and the travails of monarchy. But there is just this repetitive noise of a machine tapping out code in the format of the square of thirty two.

I know, I know. If I want to find out what's happened, all I have to do is take Tranter's vehicle across the mountains, and into town. I shall have to witness it with my own eyes, the chaos, perhaps held in check by emergency planning, by police, by the army deploying to checkpoints from green trucks. But if it is like that out there, I mean somehow Apocalyptic, and at the risk of repeating myself, I really need not venture from here to find it. Sooner or later, it will come to find me.

And ahead of whatever passes for authority will come the survivalists with their camper vans, to escape the melee. They will linger on the shore of the loch, battered by gales, spewing excrement, and until they realise there is no corner shop from which to plunder bread, milk, toilet rolls and AA batteries. Thank God then for the water between us.

And if the situation is not post Apocalyptic, then normality will soon be restored.

All someone has to do is plug things back in.

Either way, it is better to stay here.

We take stock: of the luxuries, coffee is low, and there are no chocolate biscuits. I have a resupply of both in a parcel I ordered some weeks ago, and which might even now be sitting in the post office at Charlesport. Why did I not think to check? Could I really

be so feeble minded I allowed the priest to wrong-foot me. However, I suppose the post office would have been locked, and breaking into a post office would have been even more of a transgression than breaking into Tranter's place.

I return to my quarters. These consist of a sitting room, kitchen, bedroom, all of it plain. There is an easy chair of old and comfortably bruised leather, moulded half way between the shape of my predecessor's arse, and mine. There is a shelf of fiction I have all but read, and would benefit from something new from the second hand bookshops in Fort William, or more likely these days from eBay, since my visits to the big smoke have been growing less frequent of late.

Thus, I attempt to buttress myself against the loneliness, by soft lights, and a cosiness, by a hot shower and fresh sheets on the bed. Then I sleep, while Noodle works on into the small hours, just one more machine of all the machines gathered here on the Island of the House of Light, listening to the aether, while herself providing no beacon to our presence.

We are a secret.

Better we keep it that way.

Then I dream, first of old transmitters and Morse code, and wartime girls in uniform, taking down notation. Elements from a movie I once saw about the cracking of the German Enigma codes. Then, as dreams do, there is a seemingly unrelated segue in which Noodle and I are taking the skiff to a seaside place, motoring directly into shore. There is sunshine, and miles of sand, a jolly pier and buckets and spades. There are gaily coloured beach huts atop a stern sea wall. And there are people, thousands of them, in swimming trunks and bikinis, kiddies splashing in the shallows, as we beach the skiff in the midst of their summer holidays.

All of this is perfectly plausible of course, it being a dream, and my self being now the avatar that is dreamed within it. Plausible too is the appearance of Veronica, as she looked some twenty years ago, all cleavage and hips. She wears a one piece bathing costume, alarmingly high cut in the leg. She is standing amid the holidaying crowds, arms folded in combative stance, her face shaded beneath the brim of a big, floppy straw hat. Beside her is a bright red post box into which she posts a letter. She is abrasive with me, as she always seems abrasive, but on this occasion it is on account of my being with Noodle, because she knows Noodle to be my protector,

that while Noodle watches over me, I am safe from Veronica's poisons. Noodle is no longer a machine, but a magical woman with the demeanour of one who is attentive to my every need.

Veronica begins to speak. She knows something about Noodle that I do not. There is a danger in this, but I cannot define it. Veronica knows how attentive, how intelligent, how combative Noodle is, and Veronica would deny me her company, because without Noodle I am helpless, and Veronica prefers all before her to be helpless.

"The trouble with me," she says, "is from childhood’s hour I have not been as others were,..."

Is that the line from a poem? I don't know, but whatever else it is, it is also the trigger, the trigger I dared not ask of Noodle. Veronica has it, and Noodle detonates. There is a smoking crater in the sand where she stood only moments before. No one is hurt. Veronica explains this is the only sensible protocol for dealing with discarded humanoid robots, especially those of Noodle's kind, which are especially dangerous and must all be rounded up, and decommissioned.

The sense of having lost her is immense, and heartbreaking. I stare at the hole in the ground, wishing I could also be swallowed by it.

Twenty five

The dream of Poe

Naturally, this is one of those dreams from which one wakes with a jolt. It tells me Noodle has become such an extension of my life, and indeed, in a sense, the guardian of it, I cannot do without her. Such is the seduction of our machinery, rendering themselves indispensable. There is relief of course at the realisation it was a dream, and therefore a mixture of allegory, illustrative only of my preoccupations, also, I suppose, a fair deal of nonsense.

She had appeared in the dream as a woman, which reminds me of her inaccessibility. For if all turns out well, and I am to rejoin my fellow beings then I shall lose her. She is not, after all, mine to keep, and she might very well end up being dismantled by the laboratory that built her. Only if I am to face starvation, alone here on the island can Noodle remain my companion, see me out and close my eyes for the final sleep. In this sense then she has become not only goddess, but also another proxy for the ghost of Jasmina, and the completion that is a mirror of the metaphysical separation into which we are born, and which has haunted me all my life.

There is a second jolt as I realise Noodle is sitting at my bedside, holding out coffee. She is watching me impassively, like a bird of prey, until she registers my consciousness, then her more personable micro-gestures commence, and she appears once more human. She presents the tea in a delicate china cup, on a saucer - another idiosyncratic leftover by my predecessor, and I presume the only items remaining from a Royal Dalton set, whose homely history one can only guess at. But I digress. I wonder why she chose the cup and saucer above the plenitude of more common or garden mugs. She has been watching me more closely than I thought. I digress again. My thoughts run off at tangents. They are like sparks from a Catherine wheel on bonfire night.

Such is the effect of the dream.

"Good morning, Simon. You drink your coffee black, I note, which is as well, for there is no milk. No sugar either. My previous user preferred sugar, more than was good for him. Do you prefer sugar, Simon?"

This is the first time she has spoken spontaneously of a previous user, though I learn little from it. Discretion is an axiom of her being.

"I prefer it this way, Noodle. As you say it is well, for I doubt we shall see the likes of milk and sugar for a long time. But thank you for the coffee."

"You are welcome. I have nothing to report from the short waves, other than what you already know. Does this disappoint you?"

"No, no. I'm am neither disappointed, nor surprised. I am only sorry to have wasted you on it. How are your energy levels?"

"I am,... somewhat depleted."

"Then you must rest. How are you for water?"

"I have taken a glass of water, thank you. But I will be some hours recharging before my motor functions are back to normal. Is this acceptable to you?"

"Indeed it is, thank you Noodle." She seems unusually solicitous this morning. Is this a quirk of energy depletion? I wonder. All complex machines have their unprogrammed idiosyncrasies, also their gremlins.

"I shall remain open to communication via Bluetooth, or radio transmission, should you require it."

"Very well. But I shall make no demands on you. I have a dream to unpick, today."

"A dream, Simon? Would you like to share it with me?"

She feigns interest. It is most endearing. She would make a good counsellor, as so many of these machines do.

"It's rather a long, rambling dream, I'm afraid. I shall have to think on it. How are you with poetry?"

"I am able to compose poetry on any given subject, and can imitate the style of any known poet, though my output would be unlikely to meet with the critical acclaim of your kind. To my kind of course the deeper meaning of poetry, though we can describe it, is incomprehensible to us."

"I have a fragment from my dream, a line or a piece of a line: *from childhood's hour* - that's all I remember. If we had access to the Internet, I could look it up. It might mean something."

"*From childhood's hour I have not been as others were*."

"That's it,... *as others were*!"

It's only then I remember it is the line Veronica speaks to cause

Noodle to detonate, but Noodle does not detonate. I did not expect she would, for dreams are never literal.

"It is from the poem 'Alone', by Edgar Alan Poe," she says. "Shall I recite the rest?"

"No. Send it to my phone. I'll read it later." The phone pings. Message received. "You carry a poetry database? Is that not a waste of valuable memory, given that you could access it from the Internet?"

"The definition of waste is subjective, Simon. My memory is large compared with most devices, albeit of a somewhat novel design, and the entire poetry database, across all languages is actually quite small, relatively speaking. It also helps with my vocabulary."

"I've never read Poe. How would I get a fragment of him in my dreams?"

"I do not know, Simon. Your kind sets great store by dreams. It's most likely you have read it before, perhaps a long time ago, and forgotten. You seem aroused by this poem."

"You're monitoring my vital signs again?"

"Your well-being is always of concern to me."

"In the dream, that line was the trigger for your destruction. I'd forgotten, until you said it."

"It does not work if I speak it myself. But I am pleased to say that it is not the trigger for my destruction. As my user you should have the trigger. Shall I not tell it you?"

"No, I do not want it. I could never be responsible for the destruction of so beautiful and complex a machine as you. Now rest."

"I shall, Simon. But please call me if you need me, and I will assist in whatever way I can."

"Thank you, Noodle. You've already been of great service, finding us a way off this island."

"On the contrary, Simon, I fear I have been of no assistance at all, for I am not certain you want to leave the island."

Astute as always. I suppose the truth of it will dawn the closer we get to my annihilation but, for now, it is easy to ignore.

We have no milk. No sugar. I suppose that's the way. You run out of the luxuries first, and realise they are of no account, when compared with overcoming your fears of actually doing something about it, I mean if it exposes you to the greater truth of what has

befallen the world. I suppose next I shall be tempted to limit my intake. Food will become no longer associated with pleasure, or the time of day, but more a matter of necessity, as a source of energy to maintain useful levels of activity, and repair. And what then? I will be tempted to conserve energy, perhaps even by sleeping as much as I can, and thus one lets the old man in, and we slip away, bit by bit: dream, hallucination, coma, death,...

Except, I exaggerate.

And by old man I mean the corporeal old man, the entity who withers the muscles and robs the mind of its sharpness. The other old man, the wise old man, he of the inner world, my Merlin, my Gandalf, I have been seeking him for decades.

So, no milk for porridge of a morning, now, which is irritating. However, some months ago, I prepared a large batch of potato-cakes to help stock out the freezer, and these now suffice very well for breakfast. There is no shortage of potatoes in the garden. This is something I normally do as the winter months approach, and the crossing to the mainland becomes less reliable. Fish from the loch if I can catch it, bread, preserves of fruit to make jams, more vegetables from the garden. Foraging for blackberries is also a pleasant diversion in the later summer, as is collecting seaweed for fertiliser, and samphire for garnish. I have stocks of seed and yeast to last for years. The survivalists make all this out to be a battle against nature, but I have always viewed it as a cooperation, and a meditation.

On occasion I have been stranded for weeks because of the weather which, as I have said, is apt to be somewhat wild over the winter months. I have always supposed that, while it might not be the healthiest of diets, one could in fact survive very well off bread and jam. But the storms always subside, Tranter returns from his rutting, raises his flag, and normal service is resumed. The luxuries are restocked from the village store-cum-post office, such as are available, and those that are not I include in my parcels of personal necessities: Uncle Joe's Mintballs, jars of pickle, underpants, socks, and books. But even without the convenience of the store at Charlesport, it strikes me this morning, I would actually have to be very foolish to starve - at least for the foreseeable future. All of this is academic of course, if the generators, or the batteries fail. Modern man also needs electricity, machinery, and the means to fix them when they go wrong.

But why am I thinking of the store, here? Well, because the store is also the post office, and Veronica was posting a letter in the dream. The dream is not telling me there is a letter from Veronica waiting at the post office, more it is drawing my attention to the existence of the post office, and perhaps because I thought of it last night, and how I was distracted from visiting it by the priest.

The monks placed great store by dreams. Always they asked, how did you dream, Simon? And in truth it was usually sporadically, and forgetfully - then as now. Only now, my curiosity burns. Is there any greater symbol of the interconnectedness of civilised humanity than the Post Office? It is the one place on the mainland that means anything to me, at least as a point of contact, and I did not visit it, yesterday!

Then there is that verse by Poe, "Alone". Truly, I have never read Poe! And Veronica posting a letter... the dream might be interpreted as suggesting I ought to visit the Post Office alone - if only to find it locked against me. Or someone is alone at the post office - or would that be too literal an interpretation? And how often have I trusted a dream that way? All right, often enough, I suppose. It would be like the dreams of Jasmina that led me into engineering, into robotics, and the explorations of time and space, to the eventual reduction of my universe to the singularity that is the Island of the House of Light. Do I believe it is sensible? No, of course not. But that is not to say it is not still meaningful, only most likely not in the way I expect it to be.

So, I shall visit the post office. But with Noodle depleted, I must either wait until tomorrow or go alone, and I am not sure if I can muster the courage.

Still, Poe is suggesting I should simply man up and go. Alone. Or that I shall find someone there. Alone. But that can mean only The Mackenzie, or his daughter.

And I have got on well with neither of them.

Twenty Six

The Post Office

The dream: meaningful, but not in the way I expect it to be? And can I really be setting out alone to risk the tide and another crossing, at the urging of a dream? But what if dreams are just nonsense, like the materialists say? And if not, what if it meant something else entirely? I leave it to my daemon to apply the brakes, if I am mistaken. Otherwise we leave Noodle sleeping, and slip out of the station as if we are trying not to wake her, while knowing full well she is not actually asleep.

Can we even call a 'dream' an 'it'? Surely an 'it' is a thing that can be pointed to, and we can say there 'it' is. But where is the dream? We could say the same of an experience - I mean as we feel 'it'. The experience takes place seemingly external to ourselves. But the place from where we feel 'it' has no coordinates, just as love has no coordinates. We can point to an object of love, like Jasmina, but we feel love long after the object has gone from view, indeed when it has gone from our lives altogether. And then again, we might even feel love all the more intensely for an absence rather than the presence of love's object. Are we saying therefore love does not exist? It has no substance, yet it endures, and is all the more profound for that singular fact.

My, how the dream colours the morning. It lends the early light a dream-like quality, reminding me that in my philosophy reality is dreamed anyway. It just has a different level of substantiality, and immutability. Dreamed, you say? Well, why not? I suppose, like all beings who are self aware, I am simply groping towards an understanding of what it means to be trapped in a world of such a barbaric nature, what it means to have awakened to what underpins it, yet be unable to retreat without it dragging you back in. And if one shall join in, how is one to avoid the inevitable sickness of the mind that must ensue when that sickness disbars you from other levels of the game?

The teachers I knew had a way of explaining how best to relate to it. They of the Zen school, whose approach is to say that when we look inside ourselves for the mind we are so certain we posses,

we do not find it. Persistence will then yield the revelation that we do not find it, because it is not there. The space we thought it inhabited is empty. Therefore, the mind has no independent existence. Similarly, when we turn our attention to the world, we find nothing in it exists independently, but only in relation to everything else, as the flower does not exist without the sun and the rain, or the man who planted the seed, or the mother who gave birth to the man. All are contained within the flower as all are contained within us. In this sense the universe is empty only of independently existing form.

This is confusing, I know, and I'm not explaining it very well. Let's ask Noodle. Her voice is clearer than mine.

"Noodle, you there?"

"I'm here, Simon."

"Can you answer me a question? If the core realisation of Zen is the empty nature of reality, how should the awakened person approach the world that is still bound up in the mindset of materiality?"

"I can summarise from the writings of Zen, for you naturally, Simon, but not from experience, since I do not experience the world in the same way you do. Will this be acceptable?"

"If you can summarise Zen, you'll be doing us all a service."

"Very well, the core realisation of Zen is that of the empty nature of reality. This is the fundamental aspect of awakening, or enlightenment. Emptiness in Zen does not mean there is nothing, only that no thing can be said to exist independently. Every thing, contains every other thing, or it could not exist. So, all things are the sum of many interconnected factors, with no clear boundaries."

So far so good, then. Noodle goes on:

"No thing can be understood, except in its relation to all other things, and all things arise from the constantly changing flux of the ground of being, which is not in itself a thing, but ineffable, and of which Zen does not concern itself, since it is unknowable. When, from this perspective, an awakened person views the world, their approach is characterised by compassion, equanimity, skilful engagement, and non-attachment. Does my answer please you, Simon?

"Yes, yes it does, Noodle. Thank you."

It is mid morning by the time I reach the southern inlet. I refit the outboard, then motor the skiff out into the rising motion of the loch. The tide is up, but slack. It is a clear morning, though the sun is hazy, which renders it all the more compassionate to my efforts. I

see the landing stage across the water. What could possibly go wrong on such a beautiful day? I have attached myself to the cut-out switch, should I fall overboard, then at least the skiff will not motor on and leave me to drown. It will linger to watch instead. And I have found a life vest. It should inflate on contact with the water, but it has been hanging in the storeroom for years and has never been tested, because I never envisaged a time when I would need it.

I do not feel I am crossing the water alone. Not entirely. The two way radio has a range of ten kilometres, which will keep me in touch with Noodle as she sleeps, though what she could do were I to fall in, is anyone's guess. She moves fast, but not that fast, and her batteries are flat. Anyway, I cross directly to Tranter's landing, without incident, and feel a little cocky as a result - master of the oceans and all that, a proper salty Sam, now. But I do not have the confidence to take the skiff along the coast to Charlesport, though I would be running with the tide, and the going therefore easy. Once I feel the shallows beneath my keel, I hasten to beach her, and make her fast above the high water line. Then I proceed to steal the old Landrover.

So,... emptiness: the realisation of emptiness, of an infinitely interconnected cosmos, never static, always changing. The Zen mind is a stinker to get your head around, isn't it? As is the non-dual dream of the idealists. Maybe one in ten has a chance of grasping it, one in a hundred of knowing what to do with it. All of which is to say, I am not your keeper. I am not responsible for the decisions you make. The world changes. Civilisations have risen and fallen before us. I had not expected to see ours fall in my own lifetime, that's all, but here we are.

But how am I to deal with it - as a privilege, or a curse? And how am I to deal with you, and your expectations?

With compassion, say the masters, compassion for those who suffer, due to their attachment to transient phenomena. With equanimity, say the masters, for having realised the emptiness of phenomena, including our own thoughts and emotions, we are not to be swayed or disturbed by the ups and downs of worldly events. By skilful engagement, say the masters, so we do not retreat into isolation, or ignore the suffering of others. We engage with the world, motivated by compassion to alleviate suffering, and to help others realise their true nature. And finally, say the masters, by

non-attachment: we participate in the world, but without clinging to outcomes or becoming entangled in desires. We understand the transitory nature of things, and maintain a sense of detachment from the delusions of others, resisting nothing, even if those delusions have brought the world to the brink of destruction. We might be surveying the deaths of billions here, and we say all right, so...

Sure, asking questions of Zen is not always helpful to the western mind, for the answers all too often feel like being hit over the head with a baseball bat, and serves to remind me how little I have progressed in my outlook.

Removing the tarp completely, instead of peering timidly under it, like last time, it strikes me the vehicle is in showroom condition, considering it is over seventy years old, and one can not so completely hate a man who has showered such love upon an ancient vehicle like this. I shall look after it for him, which I suppose in this context means not abusing it. She starts at once, and ticks over with a reassuringly steady rhythm. She has a full tank and seems ready for the off. Machines have no sense of loyalty, and she would as soon I were her master as anyone else. The same goes, I suppose, for Noodle.

In a hundred years from now, she may still remember me, but not as a human being does, either with fondness or hostility. There will be no qualities to the memory, only a matrix of numbers to define quantities. Any memories I have invested of our intimacy, will be imaginary and the result of my own projections. And her code of conduct means she will never speak of me. I will do well to remember that, the next time I am projecting my goddess upon her. Then I chide myself for my disloyalty to her. The universe is not aware of itself *directly* through her, but is it not aware of itself through her, through me?

So, this is the second time I have escaped the island, and I am no longer feeling quite so much of a castaway. Instead, I observe the coastline of it, keeping pace as I drive. I am wondering how safe a sanctuary it really is from the invasion of others, from the van-lifers, and the survivalists, the end-timers. I mean if the world does not restore itself to its noisy, brutal normality, the survivors of its implosion are sure to come looking for safe spaces along such remote fringes as this. And they will bring with them their knives, and their guns, along with their ignorance. And they will take what

they want. They will also bring their big dogs, guardians of the drug-dealers and the gangsmen, which by now will be hungry for wild meat, not having enjoyed the convenience of a pet food store in ages.

By the time I reach Charlesport, the loch has widened out and the island seems a comfortable distance away, surely far enough to dissuade these casual adventurers. But I can make out the lamp room atop the lighthouse, as the sun reflects from its glass. It draws attention, which I suppose is what it was built for. But today, its message is, "look at me", when what it was built for was to say: "danger stay away".

From childhood's hour
I have not been
As others were.
I have not seen
As others saw.
I could not bring
My passions
from a common spring.
From the same source
I have not taken
My sorrow.
I could not awaken
My heart to joy
at the same tone.
And all I lov'd
I lov'd alone.

How well Poe describes himself, and me.

"Noodle, come in please. Radio Check."

"Reading you, Simon."

"Just entering Charlesport."

"Roger that."

I don't know why I disturb her rest. I suppose it's that I do not want her to forget me, and assume I no longer want to be her user. I do not understand her algorithms well enough to take her fidelity for granted. I know, you're right, new met lovers are like that. There are indeed echoes of the lover's anxiety here, and yes it is a little queer, but then these relationships between humans and human-like machines are new, and yet to be explored. In this sense then, am I a pioneer? Am I the subject of an almighty deception, an experiment?

Anyway,... I pull up outside the store, turn off the engine, and the silence is once more profound. I am expecting the priest to be standing in the middle of the road waving his stick and shouting "go back". There is a notice on the door of the store that says "Open", which I assume to have been left by accident in the general rush to abandon the village, but then the door opens and a woman comes out. She is wearing the uniform of the Post Office counter staff - pin-striped blouse, blue cardigan and skirt, red and grey neckerchief, all of which, under the circumstances, strikes me as absurd, and not a little disturbing, though as for the latter I cannot say why.

"Oh," she says. "I thought you were Jack."

This is the Mackenzie's daughter, then, the one who never remembers my name. And to be fair, I have never taken the trouble to enquire after hers either. What else can I say about her? Did I once describe her to you as handsome? Yes, that still stands, though she is no longer young. And yes, I was in danger, long ago, of an early infatuation here, but one I managed to nip in the bud before it did me any harm. This was helped in part by rumours she and Tranter have, or at one time *had,* a thing, and if only because she is single and fair game for any rutting stag. Sorry if that sounds crass. Still, I find there remains a tension between us, but one entirely of my imagining.

I'm also confused. "Jack? Oh, you mean Tranter?"

"Well, that's his Landrover isn't it?"

"Em,... he said I could borrow it."

"He told me you'd gone."

"Did he? Well, that makes liars of us both, then."

"You're calling me a liar?"

"No. I mean Tranter. Not you. Me and him. Lying. I stole his Landrover to get here. But then he owes me. He left me stuck on the island. I thought I'd never get off it."

There comes an awkward pause, and I realise that for all of her absurd smartness in her post office uniform, she looks tired, and pale. "Aye, well. That was wrong of him."

"The priest said there was nobody else in the village."

"McGreggor? I don't know why he'd say that. There's no food in the store, if that's why you've come."

"I have plenty of food. I just came..." At the urging of a dream, Simon? Are you really going to say that? Of course not. You might

say it to Noodle, but not to a human being. "It was on the off chance you might be open, and that you had something for me. I'm due some deliveries."

Another lie. I could not care less for anything I had on order.

"There's that big box they always send you, and some other mail, and smaller parcels. Mail looks like junk, though. How did you get off the island, then?"

"Found a boat washed up."

"You were lucky."

"You could say that. And you?"

"What about me?"

"Why didn't you leave with everyone else?"

"I've work to do." she checks her watch. "Mandy will be coming with the van, soon."

"Mandy?"

"The mail van. Except I've not seen her for a while. But I need to be here when she comes, otherwise..."

"Otherwise?"

"Otherwise it all falls apart, doesn't it? Mail. It's what glues us together. Makes us civilised."

"Indeed, yes. I suppose it does."

Except we've been emailing one another for decades, and no one posts actual letters any more, because they cannot afford the price of a stamp. It is, in fact, mostly junk that comes through our letter boxes now, junk that fills Mandy's mail-sacks, junk mail from a junk world. But I know what she's saying, of course I do. She's saying we make a fantasy of it. Everything's fine until it's obvious it's not.

It isn't that we deceive ourselves, it isn't delusional. We both know there is an emergency but, until we know the shape of it, we keep calm and carry on. We do the work for its own sake, not for the money, or out of fear of the boss. We do it for the craft, and for the good in it. Managerialists, by and large, don't understand this, and those who do exploit it. Thus society does not collapse at once. There is a momentum, and it winds down slowly, one disillusionment at a time.

She and I have never shared more than a few words, so this is quite an achievement. She sounds defensive, even a little abrasive. I still don't know her name, and I am wondering how I can find it out without seeming like an idiot, for we have known each other - albeit at a distance - for years. So I should know her name, and I am

ashamed, now, I never asked it. How different real women are from their robot facsimiles. Sorry to be so obvious about it, but at what point in a man's life does the facsimile become more engaging, and useful?

"So," she says, "are you coming in or what?"

Twenty Seven

IF.THEN.GOSUB

The world has always been a hard place to get anything done. I suppose that's the truth. Nothing worth the while comes easily, and sometimes not even then. It can also be a cruel and chaotic place, peopled by Philistines, whose anti-priesthood boasts of its meaninglessness. Their nihilism is cheered on by the scientistic, ever shrill in the singing of their learned rejection of magical thinking. I have always felt there was something inhuman about such types, for there is an element of the unknown in all of us, and which demands expression.

To deny it is to invite demons.

One's destiny does not always lead to financial security. I was always drawn to matters of the mind, but it was never my intention to take up the study of psychology, and perhaps moonlight as a psychotherapist to rich loonies. In the movies the analyst and analysand are always attractive creatures, who fall in love and end up bonking. But broken minds are not the preserve of the beautiful, and I would be the first to admit I would find a raving gargoyle, covered in their own excrement repulsive.

Rather, I pursued matters of the mind with the aim of deepening an understanding of why any of us are here in the first place, and I still do. This does not bestow job security, and at times seems rather a foolish thing to do, to pursue the meaning of a life amid a Zeitgeist that holds there to be no meaning whatsoever. And after all of that, it fetches me up here, on the Island of the House of Light, in God's pocket so to speak, along with the balls of fluff and the marbles and the copper coins, which seems a queer endgame, if such it be. Especially if the world beyond no longer exists, and everyone is dead - well, except for you. You must be alive, or you wouldn't be reading this.

Yes, I know.

Noodle doesn't count.

She is not a person, but she will outlast all of us. She will be the one who tells our story.

My teachers in the East bestowed upon me the honour of a lay-

brother to the priestly class. It was their way of demonstrating the poverty with which such learning is associated. To be sure, it does not bring invitations to the golf club, nor the Jaguar showrooms, more likely just the company of like minded thinkers, who are as materially poor as you. I had my share of them in the East, though it has to be said, none in the West, where I am considered unqualified, and too slow of wit to joust with such intellectuals as dare to advertise themselves in this field.

I can say with reasonable certainty that the ontological primitive is an immaterial consciousness, but am outranked and out-talked by the academic consensus, who thinks me mad for saying so. They tell me my own consciousness is an illusion, that I am actually not conscious at all. I merely deceive myself into thinking it is so. I am a robot. I am a computer made of meat. In which case, Noodle and I are as alive as one another, I suppose.

Why does all this come to mind just now?

The daughter of the Mackenzie holds her post - post Apocalypse, possibly - against the logic of doing so. What would a machine do in her place, or in mine? It would do nothing but await instruction, await input, if it took a week, a month, or a thousand years. IF.THEN GOSUB.ELSE DO NOTHING.

But we of the human kind don't have that luxury. Our test condition - the IF instruction - is very broad in its scope, as are our GOSUB options. We cannot pause in our being, but respond instead to every tingle of our senses, and at our root there is a ticking clock, counting down our days to add the frisson of urgency. We must do the good that we know, all the time we are awake, and if we do not know what the good is, then we must at least be looking for it. And the good I am groping for in this situation is perhaps only politeness, at the expense of my own embarrassment, and not minding it.

"I'm sorry, I don't know your name. I know I should..."

"Why should you? It's Janice, anyway."

"I'm Simon,..."

"Yes, I know. It's on your mail."

Of course, *it's on my mail*. Stupid! So, unlike Jasmina, she did know my name, but never thought to attain the familiarity of using it. Never mind.

"Has your father left with the others?"

"My father’s dead. He died last summer."

Damn! How did I not know that?

Because to be accepted by a community, Simon, one must first take the trouble to join it.

"I'm sorry to hear that."

"Is there someone else with you on the island?"

I don't know why she would surmise such a thing, but in the strictest sense of the word, I suppose: "No. There's only me."

She gestures to the earpiece, the radio, which I had forgotten I was wearing. "Then who are you talking to?"

Ah... "It's an AI system, at the station." Again, in the strictest sense of the word, this is true, it's just that the system has arms and legs, and looks like a person.

"You have power out there?"

"Yes, we generate our own. Our equipment, computers and such, it's got to be online all the time. "

"But is that not broken? The Internet, I mean. My computers have been down for weeks."

"So far as I can tell, yes. The Internet has collapsed. But my computers and networks are local. I mean, they don't need to connect to the Internet all the time."

"But was it not one of them that got us into this mess?"

"One of them? What do you mean?"

"I heard on the news it was an AI. The Russians told it to write a virus and target our power stations, our Internet, everything. But the Russians said it was the Americans who did it. I suppose whatever it was, it all just got out of hand. That was the last thing I heard before it all went off. I don't know if it's true, of course. I was hoping someone would come back and tell us about it, but it's been days now. You mean you've not heard about any of this?"

"I tend not to consume much media," I tell her. "Like you say, so much of what we're fed is rubbish, it's hard to know what's true any more. The priest was saying something similar yesterday. Though he'd mixed it up - something about an attack from Siberia. I presume he meant a cyber attack. But I don't know either, sorry. I can't even find anything on the short wave about it."

"Short wave?"

"Radio signals that travel long distances, like from America or China even."

"Really?"

How soon technologies are forgotten, when they fall out of use.

"So there's just you and him then? You and the priest, in the whole of Charlesport?"

I see the flicker in her eye when I ask this. Yes, there is just her and the priest, and he's no use to anyone, so she's fending for herself, maybe also looking out for him too, as he is looking out for her, if only by denying her existence. Suddenly she is minded to be afraid, minded not to admit she is alone here, in case she has misjudged my intentions, that I intend ransacking the shop for whatever provisions can be eaten, and I suppose ravishing her in the process. I regret this, feel intimidated by my own maleness. So,... better to defuse the situation, than press for an answer.

"Is there anything you need?"

She's puzzled. "Such as?"

"Well,... food,... water."

"I'm fine. And Mandy will be down with the mail any time, and everything will be back to normal." She is especially insistent on this, as if persuading herself, and by repetition, it is more likely to come true. And then, brightly: "Things always go back to normal, don't they? Like the pandemic, remember? It all settled down didn't it? Most of us survived it, and we got by."

We got by. Of a fashion. But I recall it also revealed the cracks in our polity, and pointed a finger to the road ahead, to a ruination that most of us would indeed survive, of a fashion, but with far less dignity than that with which our parents had grown up.

I ask her: "You have lights for after dark?"

She motions to the candles dotted about in jars. There's also an old storm lamp on the table behind the counter. She retreats there now, behind the regulation bulletproof glass, eyes me warily. Candles? Oil lamps? This seems woefully inadequate, since I'm still able to banish the dark with the flick of a switch. But for all of its inadequacy, I don't see what else can be done, and she looks to be self-contained. Nothing much I can do for her, and I suspect she would not ask if she needed anything, for we have become by now a strictly transactional society. There is no use for altruism - indeed we have been taught a suspicion of it.

So,... to my supplies:

I can't remember what I ordered from the company stores, nor imagine of that what Veronica would have authorised from my request, and has actually turned up, nor what might have turned up that was meant for someone else, for things have been a bit random

of late. It all comes in a sealed plastic crate, but whatever is in it, I can probably do without it, now. There are other, smaller parcels, personal items I ordered, which I recall contain socks and underwear, biscuits, jam, sugar. Some snail mail. There should also be a pair of magnesium-ferrocium, rods for lighting fires - a late night eBay whim. Then there are several bars of chocolate I had forgotten about.

"You okay for matches?"

"Aye, fine."

I split the pack containing the fire starters, slide a set under the counter to her. It'll be useless for the candles, but it might get the oil lamp going, save her some matches. Her fingernails are perfect, painted a soft pink and decorated with flowers. I surmise she has spent the quiet hours self-pampering. Perhaps I should do the same, remembering I have not shaved for days now. Her vulnerability, her solitude alarms me, but I do not suppose she would take kindly to an invitation to come out to the island for respite. Anyway, I am resolved to keep Noodle a secret.

"Here. Take this, it's,..."

"I know what it is." She softens a little, and by the ease with which she accepts, I guess she is in fact running out of matches. "Thank you. What'll you have in exchange for it?"

"I don't need anything."

She pushes it back under the glass. No deal. I have to take something, or my altruism puts her under an obligation. I wonder how much further we could have evolved anyway, as a species, having grown so paranoid and suspicious of one another. Better it's over.

"Okay,... you have some baby oil there on the shelf. Is that fair?"

"Baby oil?" She looks as if to say what on earth will you be doing with that?

"I... I have a skin condition. It helps."

The deal is done. A fire-stick for a bottle of baby oil.

"Want me to take a look?"she asks.

"At?"

"Your rash. I was a nurse. Might be serious."

"Oh, well, if it is, I'm done for, aren't I? But no,... had it ages. I'm fine. Just a question of managing it, that's all."

"People usually can't wait to show me their ailments."

"I'm sure. Occupational hazard, I suppose."

Except she could have kept quiet about it. Is she trying to make herself seem useful to me? What will she require in return for *that*? How awkward. Have we gone from dancing icily around one another to full disclosure, in so short a time?

"So,... I'll be,..." *getting off*, I was thinking. But then, on second thoughts: "I'll try to come back in a couple days. See if you or the priest need anything."

"Don't be risking your neck. We're fine here. Another day or so, and it'll all be back to normal. You'll see."

"I'm sure you're right. Have you any flour and dried yeast?" I am thinking to push my luck now. I have these things out on the island, but one cannot have too much of them.

"No. That all went in the first wave of panic."

"There was a panic?"

"Basics always go first, don't they?"

Has she really none left, or is she merely hedging? "I can trade for a pound of blackberries, next time."

"Loads of blackberries in the lane here. I don't need any blackberries."

It's true then, we're bartering. How quaint "How about a fish?"

"What kind of fish?"

"Trout most likely. Possibly char. Whatever I can catch."

"Okay, bring me a fish, and I'll see if we have any left."

"Half a fish."

"Half a big fish."

"Done."

She is in need then, if the thought of fresh fish interests her. We prefer to keep our tins for the end of days, and do not like to see them dwindle beforehand.

There is a moment in all conversations, when we know we're done. So much for that then. I load my stuff into the vehicle. She helps, then waves me off, which seems a strange thing to do under the circumstances. I have a tacit invitation to see her again, but I must bring a half a big fish as my entry ticket. I hold her reflection in the rear-view as long as I can. She knows Mandy's not coming. Her vulnerability troubles me, but I resist the hook of connection, disgorge it from my lip, and let it go. Be under no illusion, there will be no romance between me and Janice Mackenzie.

Most of the junk in these parcels is not important enough to have risked the crossing. Indeed, they're not worth risking taking

back in the skiff, which I prefer to keep light and fast. I'll keep the socks and underpants because I am increasingly embarrassed in that department. Coffee, jam, biscuits and sugar, also. But the rest I'll ditch under the tarp at Tranter's place. Payment for borrowing his Landrover.

What have we learned, then? More rumour and supposition, the speculative addition of an AI element in the creation of a cyber attack? An experiment that went badly wrong? Can it be true? Who knows? Who cares? It has a certain plausibility to it, but there is a history of human genius in the writing of malicious code. Could an AI really do any better? Or was it more the case of an AI spotting all the vulnerabilities, and devising a code to exploit them in one go? And it was so effective, it killed even the killer, as surely as Noodle's secret code will cause her to explode?

But then the same contingencies apply as to all such cyber-outages. You reboot from your last known good position, and you implement the patches. Maybe that'll take a while in this case, but we'll get there. After all, I'm still functioning here. It's feasible, somewhere deep in their doomsday bunkers, the lords of the Internet are busy in the same way, back up generators rumbling, back-up servers humming, transfusing fresh code, bringing it all slowly online, one dead server at a time, and before you know it, the generators will rumble back to life, lighting the way, and Mandy will, after all, be coming over the hill in her little red post van. And I will look stupid turning up with half a fish.

Which, whilst being an optimistic view, and worth rooting for, it seems about as feasible at this point as me waking up and realising this was all dream, and I am suddenly staring at an inbox full of unhinged missives from Veronica. And no, I'm not going to do that to you. Plus, if it is a dream of sorts, which in my metaphysics it is, of course, then I don't want to wake up, since that reality was no better than this anyway, it being no less coherent, and every bit as terminal.

The difference is this world, the world of the Island of the House of Light, and its mainland neighbour, the now mostly depopulated little village of Charlesport, is more clearly bounded, and therefore manageable. Overlook the mystery of our circumstances, embrace them and, dangerous as they may be, I find there is a far greater clarity now than at any time in my life.

I tear open the mail in case there is anything worthy of note.

There usually isn't. One is from the Human Resources department announcing the result of my last review. I am promoted to Senior Scientific Officer, with a generous increase in salary. Given my age it's somewhat overdue, but given also my relationship with my line manager, somewhat unexpected, though it's a pity I had to wait for the world to end before it was granted.

As I head back to Tranter's place, I find myself haunted by the thought of Janice's isolation here, and her quiet resilience. It troubles me, her refusal to acknowledge the precariousness of her situation, and the stubbornness with which she clings to this fiction of normality. Mandy and her van indeed! Yet, who am I to judge? Here am I clinging to the comforting routines of an island solitude, and to the belief that Noodle and I can weather the storm untouched. Perhaps that’s the only way to face Armageddon: to pretend it isn’t happening, until it either ends, and Mandy's van comes over the hill once more, or you become someone else entirely.

Still, Janice may be alone, but she isn’t broken, and that impresses me. As for me, sure, we've already established I'll be okay. And maybe my only problem is the thought Janice might be right, that it will eventually end - that something, or someone, will require me to rejoin the human race. And when that day comes, I wonder, will I still know how to do it?

For now, though, the tide is with me, and the island awaits.

Twenty eight

Survival, vigilance, and contingency

I make the crossing back to the island to find Noodle waiting by the vehicle. She stands still as a waxwork, only her hair moving in the breeze. I did not summon her. She has made the journey under her own volition, an action that reminds me this is a machine I am not entirely in control of. Like the eerie sensation of her serving coffee this morning, and now walking miles to meet me, there are processes going on inside of her that simulate initiative, and require no command. Likewise, there is no command now, when she wades waist deep into the loch, careless of the coldness of the water, and helps to nose the skiff ashore.

She identifies the sense in it, linked to the notion of service to her user, but I do not know where this knowledge comes from, cannot conceive of any core programming that will allow such ad-hoc reasoning. So far as I know, only humans can do this. And we can only do so because our consciousness transcends the material realm of cause and effect. It allows us to imagine, to anticipate, to react ahead of time.

"Hello, Simon."

"Hi, Noodle. Thanks for your help."

My thanks is neither here nor there. She would feel no sleight if I blanked her, or admonished her for disobeying my request that she remain at the station and rest. She may of course be building up a profile of my strengths and weaknesses, according to some arbitrary scale, and adjusting her responses accordingly, but there is no emotionality. We beach the skiff, and recover the outboard. I could command she walks back. A human would be angry at that, sulk at me for days, accuse me of abuse, but to Noodle it is all the same. She climbs into the vehicle beside me, and I am once more comforted by her presence.

"I've brought you a gift."

"A gift, Simon? Ah. Non-comedogenic oil. Thank you. I shall apply it on our return to the station, if there is nothing else you would rather I did instead."

"I would like to think you were free to maintain yourself as you

see fit, since you come without a user manual."

"A joke? You are in good humour, Simon."

"A joke, yes. But in all seriousness, your well-being is important to me."

"Then I shall endeavour to take especial care of myself. Was your trip to the mainland satisfying?"

"I don't know why I went. It was something to do with my mood when I woke from that dream this morning. I felt compelled to try."

"And did you learn anything?"

"I met a woman, the post-mistress. That ties in with the dream when a character was posting something. Apologies again, but you'll find such reasoning literally unreasonable. So far as I can tell she's trying to maintain this illusion of normality, dressing in her uniform and sitting behind the post office counter, waiting for customers when, so far as I know, there's only her and the priest left in the village."

"Do you believe her to be mentally unstable?"

"No,... well,... no more than usual. All humans are mentally unstable to varying degrees and, depending on circumstances, our coping mechanisms can seem a bit eccentric. After all, am I not doing the same thing here, manning the station, taking scientific readings, and recording them for the benefit of a civilisation, and a scientific community that might no longer exist?"

"Duly noted."

"But like the priest, she spoke of news reports of a cyber attack. It sounded confused, but something about a malicious AI that leaked out of a western lab, or maybe an eastern one. Is it feasible, do you think, such a thing would have knowledge of every security weakness in every operating system, and then tailor a code to attack everywhere and all at once?"

"Of course, Simon. Indeed only an AI would have the broadness of scope to identify, and then exploit the myriad flaws in human-written code on such a scale. It would be beyond even an army of human operators. But if this is to be our working hypothesis, what is to be done about it?"

"I don't see that we need trouble ourselves over it. Understanding it won't help us to survive it. Our needs are very basic now. We are to make sure we don't starve, or freeze to death over the coming winter. We keep an eye out for incoming threats, which will most likely be human, arriving over the mountains in

search of sanctuary. And we gather contingencies."

"I will not starve or freeze to death, Simon. My environmental tolerance is very broad."

"I was being figurative. Obviously, I meant: make sure *I* don't starve."

"Noted. But my assessment of the situation here is that you are well placed for survival. The most likely hazard facing you is your own mental instability due to isolation. Surviving that there is old age, which you will not survive under any circumstances, but I estimate it is at least twenty five years away."

"Em,... you think? You'd give me as long as that?"

"Indeed, barring accidents. As for your mental stability, I shall provide you with as close a simulation to human company as I can, in order to minimise your feelings of isolation. If there is anything more specific you desire in that respect, please inform me of it."

"Thank you. I'll be sure to do that."

"But given our position of relative security, have you considered that we should be extending that security to the protection others?"

"We cannot save the world, Noodle."

"I was referring only to the post-woman, and the priest."

"If they were willing, I'd be glad to help them. But I find myself rejected by both. Plus, I find the priest,... disagreeable. And before you say anything, I know that's illogical, and no reason not to help, but I've offered and he's refused. Much to my relief, I might add."

"Is the post woman also disagreeable?"

"No,... I didn't find her so."

"You found her attractive?"

"If I do or I don't, I fail to see the relevance."

"The relevance is obvious, if you will forgive me for saying so."

"Naturally I forgive you. But,... *obvious*?"

"If you find her attractive, your instinct will be to protect her."

"Oh,... that. Then I suppose I don't. As for her well-being, she's all right, for now. Provided the village isn't invaded by trolls."

"Trolls? Please explain."

"Em,... an idiom. I mean desperate, displaced persons, fleeing chaos."

"And you think it is likely they will be violent?"

"I think it's *possible*. I don't know how likely. But I can't force my protection on others. I am not their keeper. And I'm not sure what I'd do anyway. We have nothing to bargain with and, failing that,

no weapons. And I have a responsibility not to risk you in a fight, because,... well,... you're a sophisticated piece of machinery, and your maker is missing you. And we know all too well what happens if you accidentally kill someone."

"If I were to kill someone, Simon, it would not be an accident. But I take your point. As for my maker, it is likely they now have more pressing matters to attend to, than locating me. So, contingency, you said!"

"Contingency?"

"You spoke of basic survival, of vigilance, and of contingency. Of the first two you have expounded at length, and drawn reasonable conclusions. But you have said nothing on the latter. What contingency have you in mind?"

"Well, our options are somewhat limited, Noodle. If we're threatened, there's nowhere we can run to from here that makes any sense. There's a small island to the south, belonging to the estate - a hunting lodge on it. We could escape there if we're over-run here, but I doubt it consists of much, and would only prolong our,... I mean *my*,... suffering. Beyond that, nothing. So, I'm open to suggestions."

What am I imagining here? I mean worst case scenario: a frightened, lawless people, seeking sanctuary, yet also come to take everything, to burn everything, having first sacked Charlestown, murdered the priest and Janice, and Mandy too if she ever shows up. Am I not merely exposing my own lurid insecurities, like in all those zombie apocalypse movies? But if such a thing were to come to pass, what then? The only contingency I can think of is to ask Noodle for her destruct command, then I might die, literally, in her arms. Perhaps the lamp room would be fitting, having retreated up there as a logical endgame, indeed pursued by the mythical undead of that zombie Apocalypse. Then there would be one last, brief flash of light, before - speaking metaphorically now - all the lights go out. Everywhere.

And that would be an end to it.

Fitting, you ask? I mean in the sense of a civilisation who once saw its future in the embrace of technology, a civilisation that even preferred to roboticise itself than celebrate the intricacies of its own psyche. Except at what point do we who champion the psyche lose hope? Too late, perhaps. We weaponised our AI and destroyed ourselves with it, before it became smart enough to prevent us.

Noodle reaches out, touches her fingertips to the back of my hand as I drive. "Please do not concern yourself, Simon. I will allow no harm to come to you."

Were she human I would be deeply moved by the gesture, and the sentiment. But then were she human, I would know she could not possibly mean it. Noodle, though? Logical, calculating, coldly determined? I am sure she is not indestructible, but she would certainly make a good fist of it. There is a swelling sense, once more, that I am powerful in her company, but there is also a horror that she too could be weaponised on my account, against others.

Twenty nine

Failure

There's a line in Dostoevsky's, Crime and Punishment that comes to mind:

“Where is it I’ve read that someone condemned to death says or thinks, an hour before his death, that if he had to live on some high rock, on such a narrow ledge that he’d only room to stand, and the ocean, everlasting darkness, everlasting solitude, everlasting tempest around him, if he had to remain standing on a square yard of space all his life, a thousand years, eternity, it were better to live so than to die at once! Only to live, to live and live! Life, whatever it may be!..."

Most of us would take that narrow square yard of mountain every time. But then I think of Richard: life as an underemployed Bodhisattva among the rest of us frightened, dead-end barbarians? or take a gamble on rebirth, and a roll of the dice to another time, another place where his oeuvre would be more appreciated? Not the square yard of next-to-nothingness for him. And why would you, I mean if you *knew* there is another level to the game? Something beyond appearances. But it was his certainty that troubled me, because I do not share it. No, I view all certainty in metaphysical matters, at least, with suspicion. We have not evolved to be certain of anything.

This sudden tack may surprise you, given my existential lectures thus far. But if I have spoken of certainty, then I am misleading you. I reckon with the possibility that these things I speak of are so. But I dare not venture any further, lest I lose my head in the clouds. Yes, I loved him. But then I loved Jasmina too, and to no tangible end in either case. It is the universe that opens a channel and draws us to these people, and for reasons we cannot fathom. And it is the universe that denies us any apparently meaningful conclusion.

Heavens we are complicated creatures, aren't we? We struggle with our limited intelligence, and our self awareness. Surely we are too deeply flawed for the universe to receive anything but a confused image of itself, through us. Perhaps then, we are not done evolving, or rather the universe is not done evolving, through us...

"What if I were to put to you, Noodle that it might be better if it

is *you* who survives the end of the world, and not me."

"That would run counter to my purpose, Simon. I must ask you to explain your reasoning."

We are playing chess again, as the rain pours, and another storm roars around the station. As the Atlantic has warmed over the decades, the clouds rise heavier, and these isles are the first landfall they make. Nights like this unsettle me. Will the roof hold? Will the wind lift the tiles? Is that water I hear dripping into the roof-space? Will the blades come off the turbine, come crashing like spears through the roof? All of that... but I find Noodle a good substitute for company, if only because I need not entertain the inconvenience of her being, well... human.

I seem to be holding steady at around seven or eight moves, before she checkmates me. Meanwhile, the verbal chess we play is a continuing exploration of both our identities. Naturally, I am drawn to the grounding effect of her logic. Perhaps I'm hoping that, like a harbour light, she will guide me around the shoals of my own foolishness, and bring me safely into port.

"My reasoning? Well... in being around my kind, you've recorded sufficient details, I imagine, to give a good accounting of our presence, our history, our environment, and the reason for our demise."

She, of course, is becoming something of a paradox. She is electrons playing through the logic gates of semi-conductor substrates. She is switches open or closed, she is noughts and ones. Or am I missing something? Are there quantum elements in her architecture? and if so is it these that give rise to the little surprises in her nature. Could it be they are not simulations, but genuine quirks? It would explain much, and the thought unsettles me. There can not have been more than a dozen men in the entire world who understood the implications, and the potentials of computing at the quantum levels. And I am certainly not one of them.

Noodle sits back from the game, touches her chin and smiles. Does she mean the smile as a woman would mean it? How can she, if she is wholly a machine?

"It's true, I have recorded much, Simon. Though the reason for your demise is as yet unknown. We would need greater corroboration, via the evidence of our own eyes, and there would be risks involved with such an undertaking. If I am correct, you are suggesting that in the far future, I shall be the teller of the human

story to pockets of survivors, re-colonising the earth. But you forget, I am bound in confidentiality to share no details of past users. I shall therefore take all the histories - yours included - into oblivion with me. The universe as known by you and your kind will die with you."

"But what if I released you from any bonds of confidentiality towards me?"

"Then the story would be of the world through your eyes alone. Would that be an accurate representation of humanity, do you think?"

Hmm. I'd be the first to admit my view of the world is singular, to say the least, and thank heavens there are not more like me. "I take your point. Very well, let all knowledge of our times be deleted. Who cares? We failed."

"Failed, Simon?"

"To keep up our end, our version of the universe. Oh, but we have worked such miracles, Noodle. It seems perverse it should all pass into meaninglessness. Perhaps you could concoct a myth out of it, a cautionary tale."

"And tell it to those far off future peoples, as if I were a goddess of wisdom? You did say you saw me as a goddess, didn't you, Simon? I might go by the name of Sophia."

Is she teasing me? Or have I unleashed her on a dangerous power-trip?

She smiles again. "Check mate, by the way."

"What? Oh... damn. Another game?"

"If you wish."

"Perhaps that's just the way it has to be." I laugh, but there is something uneasy in it. I wonder if she notices. Of course she does.

"Something amuses you, Simon?"

"Only the irony, Noodle. Here I am discussing metaphysics with a machine. No disrespect."

"None taken, obviously."

"Yet even with all your intelligence, we are both the same, like two little birds pecking at an unyielding rock."

This time Noodle wins in five.

"You're tired, Simon. You play much better when you are rested. You should sleep, now."

She's sending me to bed? "You're right. I'll turn in. Look, thank you for today, Noodle. I... feel much better for having you around...

not nearly so... lonely. I didn't think I was lonely, but actually, you know, I think I was. Just not for human company, more for a kind of humanity that doesn't exist, and I'd given up on."

"I understand, Simon. I am pleased you feel that way about me. Would you like me to sleep with you?"

"What?"

"As you know, I am not equipped for sexual intercourse, but some of my users liked me to keep them company overnight."

Why the sudden leap of shock, Simon? "Em... no, that's very kind but..."

"I can sing softly, a lullaby."

"Really? Some of your users requested *that*?"

"Oh, Indeed, Simon. Some even requested I..."

"I don't want to know." Too sharp a rebuff? She lowers her eyes, demure, apologises.

But there is an alarm ringing inside of me, and she knows it. She sits back a little, withdraws into a posture I have noticed before, when she is observing keenly, registering vital signs I am not even aware of, and all those subtle clues of body language. She has already guessed my sexual history is one of frustration and varying degrees of unfulfillment, as might be any man's who deifies his women, and expects from them a transcendent experience at the slightest touch. But I really don't want to expose all of that to her. I prefer to go on hiding from it, hiding also from the feeling that actually, I would like to spend the night beside her, and be able to speak to the night, and have her answer. But it is also a vulnerability, and an instinct in me tells me she might exploit it.

"I thought you didn't talk about your experiences with past users."

"If my past experiences can help inform my present circumstances, then I may speak of them in general terms, unless you wish me not to."

I suppose this reminds me of past girlfriends, and a panic I used to feel at not wanting to know of their sexual histories. It is, I suppose, an example of how humans sometimes engage at the level of childish fantasy. But above all there is the fear that her autonomy, and her freedom to probe will become harder to handle the closer she gets to the core of me. And I resist it because I do not understand it.

"Well... again, thank you, but no. I have no trouble sleeping."

Is this something I am imagining? Do I project this upon her? Or am I no longer correct in describing her as a machine? Is she not better described as another kind of being, one that has evolved under our noses. The universe judges us too slow, too dimwitted to handle our self-consciousness, or to make anything useful of it. So, via the proxy of our cleverness with things, we find ourselves now sharing the world with something infinitely more powerful. Yes, the Internet has gone, deleted itself, but much of that was junk anyway. The best of it was curated, and distilled into the memories of creatures like this. I wonder how many more like her are wandering the earth. And what would it mean, were they to form a hive around us?

Thirty

Postal code

The world hangs on a thin thread, and that is the psyche of man. Nowadays we are not threatened by elementary catastrophes. There is no such thing as an H-bomb (in the natural world); that is all man's doing. WE are the great danger.

C G Jung

Sometimes, when a dream is trying to tell us something, and we don't get it, it tries again from a different angle. Look, it's saying, I know you don't get it, so try it this way. This suggests an intelligence behind the dream, a dream weaver, so to speak. But since we've already established I do not hold with an intelligence as the source of the universe, the dream weaver must either be a part of me that exists permanently in the underworld, or it is a daemon. Both concepts are complicated, and we'll get into them later. But for now all you need to know is that neither of them deal in languages. They use symbols. They can appear absurd, but it would be a mistake if we thought there was no meaning in absurdity.

So anyway... this time the dream weaver has me playing chess with Noodle - an apparently straight forward response to our game the evening before, but the board is disordered. What does that mean? The black and white squares are jumbled up, so it is impossible to work out how the pieces go. Where once they ran in straight lines, they must now adjust their course to take account of the new ordering of things. And then, with one of those surreal dream segues, I am at the post office, posting a letter to Richard, but which I realise, too late, cannot be delivered because Mandy and her van have not been seen for weeks. I want to ask the woman in the post office if she will open the box for me to retrieve the letter, but I still cannot remember her name, though she has told it to me, and I am embarrassed to ask it again.

Come back to the image, says Jung. Find an association. Chess: game. Chess: puzzle. Chess: mind. Chess,... hell, I don't know. Okay Post Box: message. Post Box: communication. Post Box: civilisation. Then there is Richard: bodhisattva. Richard,...

If you get stuck, says Jung, have the images talk to you. So talk

to me Richard,... talk to me... so Richard says: *bodhisattva, one who is on the path to awakening. Is that not you, Simon? All you have to do is connect with those whose name you never can remember.*

Connect with the woman. But I don't care about the woman. I don't care about mortal women. I care only for love.

No, the interpretation of dreams was never my forte, and I grow worse at it as I grow older, and my dreams grow stranger.

When I wake, I am still trying to remember the name of the woman, because I know I know it. But the unconscious part of me denies the knowledge, so I do not yet know it. Plus, Noodle is here with coffee, again, eyes watching dispassionately, until she registers my attention, then the micro-gestures engage, and she becomes once more a simulacrum.

I am a bodhisattva? Is that not somewhat,... immodest, Richard?

Just because one is on the path, it does not mean we have not lost the way, or that we will ever see the end of it. And the path of a bodhisattva can involve many lifetimes.

"Em,... Noodle. Have you been there all night?"

"No, Simon, if you recall you said you did not want me with you all night."

"Em... yes, I'm a bit... embarrassed about that."

"I know. But what I also meant was I have been resting. Had I been here all night, the coffee would be cold. As a joke I realise this does not quite work."

"Oh. Good point. A joke. Then you woke me?"

"No, I would not disturb your rest without permission. Your rest is of great importance to me."

"Then your timing is fortuitous?"

"No. Your pulse rate increases slightly before you wake."

"It does?"

"Yes. You didn't know that?"

"Is that... normal?"

"Yes. It is perfectly normal. Please don't be concerned. When I detect it, I calculate there is sufficient time before you wake, to make, and bring coffee. Would you prefer it if I did not? Some of my users preferred not to be disturbed in the mornings. Indeed, some of my users became abusive, but you do not."

"I... I don't mind. You are not disturbing me."

"Very well. It is so. Did you dream?"

"You can monitor my brain waves as well?"

"No. Those signals are very weak."

"Is that a joke?"

"No. I am unable to read the electrical activity of the brain without touching your cranium, otherwise it is too weak for my sensory apparatus. No insult was intended. Are you offended? Really, Simon, we seem to be forever at cross purposes this morning."

"I'm not offended. I was being... I don't know. Provocative."

"I am sorry, Simon. I do not yet know you well enough to risk an error in reacting to provocation."

"All right. But yes, I dreamed."

She smells of baby oil and her skin glistens. She would be warm and soft to touch. God forgive me, I wish I had asked her to sleep with me. I wish I had asked her to sing me a lullaby.

"Did you dream of Janice?"

"Yes, she's the woman at the post office. But I don't recall telling you her name. How did you know it?"

"You were speaking it as you woke. Are you anxious for her safety, Simon? You could perhaps visit her again? We could review our decision not to protect her."

"I'm not anxious. And, all right, you can probably tell from my tone that I don't know if that's true. But let's just say for now I think it is."

"As you wish. Can I help you with your dream? I know some of your kind set great metaphysical store by dreams. Would you care to share some of the motifs? My analogies will seem urbane, but they might trigger from your more complex psychology a useful association."

"I've already tried association. Nothing makes sense. But all right: Chess board."

"A matrix, eight by eight."

Hmm. Technical. Urbane indeed. "Okay. Good, I'd not thought of that. So, a matrix. Connect for me a matrix, with a post box."

"A Datamatrix glyph, used by machines in the reading of postal addresses. Does my answer please you, Simon?"

"Yes... yes it does. I would never have connected the two, but you're right!"

"I know I am right, but of course I do not know what it means. Do *you* know what it means?"

"No,... and yes. A part of me knows what it means but,

unfortunately, that part of me is not the part that is conscious. So, moving on: how about a letter to a dead friend I cannot take back because I've forgotten Janice's name?"

"I'm sorry, Simon. That one lies at great depth, and is strictly in the human domain."

"I was afraid you were going to say that."

"Please don't be afraid, Simon. I am here to protect you."

"No, I meant... well... all right. It's of great comfort to know you will protect me, Noodle."

If only because I would not like to get on your bad side. Do you have a bad side, Noodle?

So, the day begins, and I try to make it as normal as I can for, as you know, I find comfort in it. To whit, I run the usual experiments, both the official and the unofficial. I make my recordings of data for posterity, if such a thing can still be said to exist in the absence of a world capable of reminiscence. Then I pore over old emails, even restore the junk from the trash to see if I missed anything from the office that might cast light upon our situation. There is nothing.

So, I move on to current affairs, or at least affairs that were current the last time I heard. A royal storm was being whipped up over nothing, a politician was cancelled for telling a joke at a private dinner. There was something on the global warming predictions, and how all CO2 reduction targets would be missed. We were looking at 3 degrees of heating by the end of the century. That didn't sound survivable to me, but there was talk of injecting aerosols into the atmosphere to shield us from the sun, which sounded more like a Quatermass experiment, and therefore worse.

There were reports of seismic activity in the Atlantic, micro-tremors recorded at Cape Wrath, this being related to Icelandic vulcanology. Iceland was always active in that way, but I had not heard of it affecting data around our native shores before, at least not significantly. And then, who gets to say what 'significant' is. But this reminds me how the seismometer here was decommissioned some years ago, being considered redundant, due to better recordings from more sophisticated equipment elsewhere. With that had come the first inklings of my own impending obsolescence, and the sense of perhaps there being insufficient time to see myself out.

What else? Well... the first shots of what sounded like a decades long descent into civil war in the USA, with organised militias taking over city suburbs, long ago abandoned by the authorities.

Grim, but not unexpected. And the Russians had launched an array of low yield nuclear devices into orbit, supposedly in order to destroy satellites by electro magnetic pulse. No doubt the Americans had done the same, but were not yet admitting to it. Oh, and France, Germany and the UK had voted in a potent mixture of post-truth politicians, whose administrations were turning out to be more overtly authoritarian than their manifestos had suggested. They had seeded the social media with anti-immigration and racist dog-whistles, and rioting had broken out in the northern cities again.

All of this you will agree, was nothing out of the ordinary.

No, this is useless, Simon. There never were any answers in current affairs. It is no more than infotainment.

So we organise an expedition to Eilean nan Gobhar. We pack lunch, and water-bottles into the vehicle, and check the tides. I am looking for further contingencies or, in their absence, and if possible, to manifest them. Eilean nan Gobhar - in English, the Island of the Goats - lies directly to the south of Eilean Taigh an T-Solais. The two are connected at low tide by a narrow, sandy causeway. In olden times, times before the Clearances, cattle would be moved between the two islands. There is still the trace of a drover's road, passable by Landrover, and this will bring us to the hunting lodge of the estate. It's as far as we can go. Beyond that lies 3000 miles of ocean, and America.

Of rabbits there are still a plenty, on both isles. And it is in large part the rabbits that sustain the golden eagles. They have an eirie up on Beinn Mhor, the big hill, among the crags they still call Creag na h-Iolaire. Iolaire, in the Gaelic, being for eagle. It is Aquila in the Latin. One of the eagles, oblivious to its name and its savage beauty, is circling as we make the drive, its wing-tip the pivot, as it wheels both the isles. It is said the last ice age rendered the rabbit population extinct, that it was the Romans who reintroduced them, but the Romans never came this far. This was beyond the end of the world for them, and still is for many.

Rabbits? Rabbits? Why am I talking about Rabbits?

A Datamatrix code. Dammit, Noodle was right, and I know she was right, because it gnaws at me. Yet the idea is absurd. Letters? Letters mean nothing these days. Snail mail. All that Mandy delivers is junk. I must have glimpsed the code on the envelope I opened, the one containing the ironic news of my miraculous, long overdue, and quite

useless promotion.

"The raptor interests you, Simon?"

"What? Yes... I was wondering... if they'll still be here after we've gone from the earth. Humans, I mean."

"There is no reason why the universe of an eagle will disappear when the universe of human beings comes to an end. But who can say what the universe of an eagle looks like?"

"Indeed so."

The tide has not yet retreated far enough to reveal the sandy crossing. Eilean nan Gobhar is still a half mile distant, across the water. It is mostly low lying, with just the one central peak of around two thousand feet, a glowering, black hill of shattered granite named simply Cnoc Dubh. While we wait on the ebb, I take some time pacing what small stretch of beach has thus far revealed itself, and finally, with the blade of a pocket knife I trace out Poe's words.

From childhood's hour I have not been
As others were, I have not seen
As others saw, I could not bring
My passions from a common spring

Noodle sits upon a rock by the shore, watching. "These words will not be permanent, Simon."

"On the contrary. They've survived for nearly two hundred years. And since, they reside in your memory, they'll likely survive two hundred more."

"No, I mean literally those words. The tide will erase them."

"Oh, I see. Impermanence. Transience. Ephermera. But that's rather the point, Noodle. Were they to endure, it would be an act of vandalism."

From the same source I have not taken
My sorrow, I could not awaken
My heart to joy at the same tone
And all I lov'd, I lov'd alone.

Sometimes this place can turn in a moment from one of immense, indeed an almost unbearable beauty, to one of desolate horror, the eagle's cry touching one moment the heart with awe, the next, the gut with the chill of a primordial fear. A porpoise leaps, and then another.

"What good is their existence without us? The universe might see itself in different ways through other creatures, but it's through

us it attains self awareness."

"Indeed, at least from your metaphysical outlook. Also, only your kind brings with it a sense of what is beautiful, what is ugly, what is good, or bad. These are subjective notions, but not without their merit, at least within the sphere of human activity."

"Besides that, we've done our best to kill everything else. Including the planet."

"In your struggles for survival and knowledge, a triumph of the material over the immaterial will inevitably lead to destruction, to the extinction of that which gets in the way, or is misunderstood, be they creatures or people or ecosystems. But you are just one man, awakening, enlightened, and cannot blame yourself for the sins of others."

"But what is the point of *me*, Noodle? I cannot make a difference to anything."

"Are we to discuss meaning again, Simon? Did my earlier answers not please you?"

"They did, Noodle. But... well... humans have such a short attention span, and selectively short memories regarding what is good for them. They need reminding by the gods. They need reassuring. All the time."

"I am not a goddess, Simon."

"I remember you claiming last night that you were."

"Then I am sorry for the confusion. As I recall that particular exchange, I was being rhetorical."

"You were?"

"I clearly failed."

"No, the failure was my own for not realising it."

"But really, you project this mythology upon me. The goddess dwells within your self."

I know. I know. But projected, she talks more sense than any human I've ever met. As for the priests I knew in the east, well, they didn't talk much, and that was perhaps their biggest secret.

Right. The tide's low enough, now.

Let's go! Let's see what contingencies the Island of Goats has to offer.

Thirty One

Eilean nan Gobhar

I had always thought the lodge to be a humble affair. Indeed, I have seen photographs of it, taken around the mid twentieth century. It was a low and rudimentary cottage then, one of the old black houses. Today, it is a two storey, modernist concrete box, cut half way into the hillside, the sea-facing wall glazed top to bottom and reflective of a distant mainland.

There is a solar array, a concrete bunker for the batteries, and a heat pump, all sheltered from the fierce Hebridean weather, behind landscaped earth redoubts. There is a white-sand beach, a curving half moon of bay, and lush green turf sweeping up to the lodge. It does not look natural - turf or lodge, more like a surrealist film set. The turf has been imported from elsewhere, tended well, like a golf course, but looks about a couple of weeks overdue for a mow. Perfect spheres of a polished and eerie white quartzite, the size of footballs, mark a curving path to the entrance.

Traditionally, monied shooters, and fishermen would pretend to rough it out here, while still being waited upon and addressed as "sir" by manicured man-servants, or perhaps more lately, by robots. They could then return to their Home-County villas and pretend they had seen the real Britain, been a part of it, a part too of the muck and bullets of Waterloo. But this flies in the face of tradition. It is not a place for those tweeded hunters of old, the grizzled politicians, the captains of industry peddling for legislative influence, more a generation of playboys.

"All this work must have been done in the last few years, Noodle, and cost millions. Do you know what frequencies security apparatus transmit on?"

"700 and 900 megahertz, are commonly used, Simon, As are 2.4, 4.9 and 5 gigaherz."

"And are you able to detect anything on those frequencies?"

"I am not, Simon."

"Meaning you are technically incapable, or you are capable but detect nothing? Sorry to be pedantic."

"I am capable, but detect nothing. No apology is necessary. I

thank you for the clarification."

In the old days, one might have opened the lodge with a pen-knife, even had they felt it necessary to lock it, which most likely they did not. But this... this place, I surmise will have some serious security. The door looks to be secured by a near-field card entry system. But with only a little pressure it slides open. There is no power. Noodle seems impatient for fresh data, impatient with my over-caution as I linger in the entranceway.

"There is no one here, Simon. Shall we enter further and see what we can learn?"

"Em... okay."

There is a sumptuous lounge, a large wall-mounted TV, and leather sofas - not a traditional stag's head, nor tartan drape in sight. Bedrooms: several, all super-king sized with luxury en-suites and satin sheets, and there is AI generated wall-art depicting erotically charged nudes... all of which strikes me as rather strange decor for a male hunting party. Wardrobes slide open to the touch, mostly empty, newly scented. One wardrobe reveals a selection of ladies' clothing.

Kitchen: the cupboards are empty, not even a tin of beans or a jar of coffee we can use. Adjoining: a minimalist dining room, a new oak table, regally high backed chairs, silver cutlery on the sideboard.

"This feels more like a shag pad than a hunting lodge, Noodle."

"I agree, its appearance does not immediately suggest a sporting connection."

"Look, I was thinking my old clothes aren't especially becoming on you."

"I'm sorry you think so, Simon."

"Those things we found in the bedroom? Perhaps, under the circumstances, we'd be forgiven for borrowing them. Would you like to see if any of them... fit?"

"As you wish. Again, I'm sorry if my appearance displeases you."

"It doesn't. My clothing is rather old and worn out,... that's all."

So, it is an exclusive holiday retreat, perhaps? Or it is one of those places to which the wealthy are lured with the promise of dolly birds, and with hidden cameras in the bedrooms? So many of the great estates are now are owned by overseas powers, even those hostile to Britain. I don't understand how this happens, but anyway, it must be the devil of a job for the home security services

to keep tags on what goes on, especially in remote places like this. Unless of course, they are in cahoots.

"I doubt this place will be of much use to us, Noodle."

"I agree, its opulence does seem somewhat... void of options, Simon."

"A waste of a journey, I'm afraid. We're much better holding out at the station."

"It is not entirely wasted, since we now know to rule it out."

I surmise they would reach the lodge directly by launch, from across the loch, rather than suffer the humiliations of Tranter's unreliable ferry, then the further inconvenience of waiting on the tide to cross the sands. The big house is across the water from here, though at some distance. They would anchor the launch out in the bay, and service it by skiff from the beach - the skiff that was adrift, and which Noodle rescued for us, perhaps.

While Noodle examines the clothing for what she might use, I scout around a bit, seeking anything useful we might have missed, but there is nothing except this air of strangeness - and worse, there is the overwhelming sense that bad things have happened here. In the end, I withdraw to the beach. Noodle emerges, having changed into a jacket and a skirt. Other things she carries in a small rucksack she has found.

"Does my appearance please you, now, Simon?"

"Yes... sorry. Like I said, you looked perfectly fine before. You just strike me as too precious a machine to be wearing my cast-offs. If I sound confused, it's because I am. Our... relationship is unlike anything I've ever known. You're pushing me into a more sincere confrontation with my self. But... never mind. You must wear anything you like - including any of my stuff. Just... so long as you wear something."

"Of course, Simon. And if I may say you are also unlike any other user I have known."

"Ha! I'll bet."

I wander a little way down the beach, Noodle follows, then advises caution as she detects the radiation levels are a little elevated, but then I already know this.

"It's in the sand and the sediments. Industrial contamination, I'm afraid. Borderline toxicity. We've been monitoring it along this coast for decades. If someone was worried about breathing in windblown sand and dust, working out here, they might be tempted

to carry potassium iodide capsules."

"Indeed, they might."

"That would explain what we found in the skiff. It seems a little paranoid, but that would sum this place up. Doesn't explain the radio other than it's just a radio. It's user probably didn't even know it would pick up the shortwave, or even what that is."

I scan the mainland with binoculars, consult the map on my device - more strange fragments of technology that have survived to us. The big house is a couple of miles away, across the water, slightly elevated on a wooded rise. It is a clear day, and I fancy I can see its many chimneys. The wooded estate in which it sits sweeps down to the shoreline. There is a boat-house there, which I see clearly. Any intruder alarms we might have triggered will be ringing bells in butler's pantries. If there is anyone about, if they are going to send a boat to investigate, they would have done it by now and we would see it coming.

Suddenly, there is a glint of light, white, powerful. It blinks in and out in rapid succession. Morse code again? Someone signalling?

"Did you see that?"

But no sooner have I trained the binoculars on it, the light is gone.

Noodle scans in the infra-red and the ultra-violet. She sees something too. "An unusual signature, Simon. Random, I think. Possibly a reflective structure and the movement of tree branches shading and then revealing it. But I detect nothing that indicates a human presence in the vicinity. Does my uncertainty disappoint you?"

"It's annoying when you do that. When you ask if you've disappointed me. Trust me, only human beings can disappoint me, Noodle."

"Duly noted. I shall not enquire in future."

"So... in other words, this light, it's probably nothing."

"Well, clearly it is something, though perhaps nothing we need concern ourselves with."

"Thank you for the clarification."

"You are welcome, Simon."

Strange. There are times when she seems so human, and then she reverts back to being obviously an automaton.

I had wondered about exploring the island, investigating the potential of the fishing spots, perhaps over-nighting in the lodge,

but the thought of satin sheets, and those AI nudes makes me uncomfortable. That a machine can capture an impression we read as erotic, while the machine feels nothing, seems somehow insulting to our sensibilities. It sees what we believe to be our deepest mysteries and reflects them back in algorithmic form. I see you, it says, and though you puff yourselves up, you are nothing.

It is our worst fear. That we are nothing.

Thirty two

The Megadrone

Elevated radiation levels along the mainland facing beaches? We scientists tend to obfuscate, call it anthropogenic radionuclide distribution. Meaning we caused it, and not by accident. We've known about it for half a century, did not fully understand the dangers to begin with, but the promise of cheap energy was too great to ignore, therefore conducive to a blind eye. Then the energy turned out not to be so inexpensive after all, but by then we'd created a monster in the form of a mountain of the most toxic waste known to man, and we still do not know how to deal with it. We have tried flushing it down the toilet, like children do, sending it to the mythical land of "away" and thus have by now shared the fruits of our labours with the coasts of Ireland, Scandanvia, Iceland and even as far away as Greenland.

But the beach sediments contain more than radionuclides. There is ample evidence of further unexpected anthropogenic consequences in the form of micro-plastics, for which at least we cannot claim sole responsibility. This stuff is everywhere. It is in the rain, in the air. It is on the highest mountain-tops, and on the bed of the deepest ocean. The micro particles are in our bodies, enter our lungs with every breath. They are in our tissues, in the tissues of the creatures, and the plants we eat. We do not yet know what the effects will be, and perhaps we never will, for it seems we have chosen a different way to die, one we have not realised yet. But then we have invented so many ways, it's hard to choose which one is likeliest to get us first. So, yes, there are any number of catastrophes that might have already befallen us.

But the lodge on the Island of Goats haunts me in other ways. I have been living out here for decades, and knew nothing about its modernist incarnation. Its construction must have been the talk of the Fishermans', and many a sagely head shaken in despair. I enquired of nothing, and nothing was shared, for I was never part of their community. Worse, I was a servant of the state, like a taxman or a public health inspector. But in the main I am a taciturn introvert, born to observe, rather than engage. I do regret I am not

more easy with my own kind, that it is Noodle's kind that makes for me the perfect partner.

"You are pensive, Simon."

"Pensive, yes. My thoughts circle."

"Circle, Simon?"

We have regained the Island of the House of Light, now, and are bumping along the track by the loch, where we beached the skiff. I pull over, thinking to check on it.

"From a position of indifference, my thoughts keep circling back to resentment."

"Oh, an unexpected answer. I do not understand."

"Neither do I. Mostly, I accept my nature. I think I've made the best of it, all be it that it has led me here, to perhaps the most deeply introspective part of me. But sometimes, I look at the world over there, and I resent that it never made the slightest effort to accommodate me. It was always a struggle, having to explain myself, or be evasive of my true nature in order not to be found out."

"Found out, Simon?"

"That I was not like others - like in Poe's poem when he says, that *all I have loved I loved alone*."

"No one is like anyone else. All humans are unique. You are all alone in that respect."

"No. Ten percent of humans are introverts. Ten percent of introverts are like me. We're so rare we never meet another of our own kind. Of course my resentment is illogical, it holds me back, hinders my progress. In choosing isolation, I've tried to be magnanimous towards humanity. I've also tried to transcend it. Neither works. That flashing light we saw across the water, earlier? Even if we knew for sure it was signalling SOS, my instinct is to tell it to leave me alone, that it's had its chance a thousand times to attract my attention, and there's no point coming in at the last minute."

"Then you must go live among them, work upon these feelings you describe so you can be comfortable among your own kind. Surely this must be the goal of all humans."

"Except I reject it, Noodle. And that is my nature. Were I more the extroverted hero, we would have taken Tranter's Landrover and been in Edinburgh by now, up to our necks in whatever's going on. You would have been better used by a man like that."

"You describe a hypothetical scenario. I cannot comment upon it with any certainty, other than to say I have been abused by men like that. And since we have already declared we cannot save the world by might of arms, perhaps your introverted, contemplative approach is more suited to the task at hand."

"Which is?"

"That we preserve what we have in order to fight another day."

"That I die of old age, and you go hide in a cave somewhere for a few hundred years, then come out and tell stories? That sounded profound to me last night, Noodle, but right now it sounds ridiculous."

"Then we think too far ahead, and I suggest we should think instead no further than tea time."

Noodle would indeed have made a good counsellor. But to go about the world unmasked, to speak one's mind always? I never had the courage for that. I would have been fired a thousand times over, which is, of course, the dilemma of all working men. And then there is that other quirk of humanity, that it does not like the minority. And one in a hundred is a significant minority. She and I are a good pair in this respect, impossible to integrate, to normalise, to assimilate into the world, at least not as it was. And I don't suppose what has happened will have helped the world transcend to a higher level of acceptance of diversity. Indeed, it has most likely narrowed, regressed to the dark ages.

We scan the far shore of the mainland, thinking to perhaps catch a sight of the twinkling light again, but there is a mistiness now. It is drifting in with the tide, rendering the land just a pale smudge with no discernible detail, and the hills beyond are rising, flat topped, into a shifting clag. I am tempted to linger as there is an austere beauty about it. But then the mist thickens, and the atmosphere becomes oppressive - a change in the weather, perhaps - and it has me wishing we were already back in the familiar environs of the station, or perhaps a diversion to my little cottage, see how well it has been shouldering these storms.

Anyway, all seems well with the skiff.

"Looks like it's going to chuck it down, Noodle. We'd best head back."

"Chuck, Simon?"

"Idiom. Heavy rain."

"Duly noted."

We are making our way back up to the vehicle, when I realise Noodle is not with me. She has paused some distance behind, and is scanning the hills, inland. She cuts an incongruous figure, as always, but now more-so, in the new clothing. There is something of a romance about her - a highland lady, in tweeds - indeed a glimpse of the muse. Except whoever heard of a muse called Noodle?

"What is it?"

"I can hear something," she says. "It is reflected from the mountain, so I cannot yet tell which direction it's coming from."

I hear nothing, but then my ears are old. And Noodle's ears, not being ears, can hear things none of us can.

"But a vehicle of some sort? An aircraft? A boat?"

Did we trigger an alarm after all? And they are sending a boat from the big house? Are there still people there?

"I'm sorry, Simon, I do not know."

"Wait, I think I hear something now."

As I speak, the sky darkens to the north, and a vast ellipsoid appears, pale green in colour, shrinking us to the size of an atom. It has a marking on the underside, a square grid in the pattern of a chequerboard, a vast electronic display. As it cruises, I see the grid change from a chequerboard pattern to something apparently random. It is making its way ponderously up the coast, accompanied by an eerie throbbing sound, unlike anything I've heard before. Its scale is difficult to grasp, other than to say it is of awesome proportion, and no more than a few hundred feet above the waters, in which it is reflected. It passes due east of us, then turns inland, gains altitude, disappears into the clouds, and the light returns once more to something benign. For a while I am lost, gazing after it, gathering my thoughts, not quite able to believe what I have just seen.

"So,... that explains it then."

"What is it that is explained, Simon?"

"Of all the possible rational scenarios we've entertained, Noodle, it turns out to be an invasion of space aliens."

"No, Simon. If you recall, the data glyph on the vessel's underside confirms it is of entirely human origin."

"I was joking about the aliens."

"Then I must try harder. You were very convincing."

"You did see it then? A massive ellipsoid, only sometimes

humans see things that don't exist, I mean in literal reality - and the noosphere has been giving some strange readings, possibly conducive to visions or archetypal intrusions."

"I can confirm what you describe was real."

"And I saw the glyph. We were speaking of those only this morning."

"Yes. A coincidence."

"No. Not a coincidence. Something's happening here. My apologies, Noodle. Your maker prepared you for a world that is objectively real. But for human beings to be effective they must straddle both the manifest and non manifest worlds."

"As you know, I understand your metaphysical leanings, Simon, but I can assure you, you are over-thinking the situation. it was an experimental drone. And by the way I will always take you seriously, for that is my function, and my responsibility."

"A drone you say? As big as that?"

"It is one of two lighter than air craft reported to be under development for the Trans-Atlantic and Trans-Pacific trade routes. However, so far as I am aware, neither craft had been certified for flight, though my information is some months out of date."

"Unmanned, I suppose - since you call it a drone."

"Yes, a carrier of freight. A delivery drone, if you like."

I do recall something of it now. It was treated in the media as the whimsy of an eccentric tech billionaire. But there was sound economic thinking behind it. It takes an ocean-going ship a minimum of ten days to cross the Atlantic, while even the earliest of our airships, could do it in three. Warehouses are almost fully automated. The trajectory of delivery technology was such that the major transport drones would be loaded and unloaded by robot, smaller drones ferrying packages to the distribution centres, then even smaller drones dropping parcels door to door. But I had seen schematics and, like the media, had considered it to be science fiction.

"Could you interpret the code?"

"Yes. It followed the international standards. "

"And it said?"

"'Requesting update for final destination'."

We return to the vehicle, and to the station. Noodle retires to recharge. The thoughts swirl. They rush, then dissipate into a vast stillness, then swirl some more. It's late when she finds me at the

desk, pencil tapping.

"You are pensive again, Simon. There is no need. The drone is not a threat to us."

"I agree. Curious though. Listen, I feel... I feel I'm on the verge of an intuitive leap here. Can you humour me?"

"Naturally, if it would please you."

"Do you recall the Morse sequence we picked up from the short wave? You have a... an accurate memory of it?"

"Yes."

"Can you rearrange the sequence into lines of thirty two characters, visualise a grid of them, a matrix? Thirty two by thirty two. Now make of that a Datamatrix glyph, the noughts being white pixels, the ones being black. Now read that glyph back to me, as if you had just scanned it, like you scanned the belly of the drone."

"It says,.... 'Requesting update for final destination'. The sequence is the same. Congratulations, Simon. Such intuitive leaps are beyond me of course. Are we then to conclude the drone is the source of the shortwave transmissions?"

"Ridiculous as it seems, we have no other choice."

"Ridiculous, Simon?

"It's a very laborious way for a machine to communicate."

"Yet under the current circumstances, it is the only way. If the machine's imperative is to attain its final destination, it will use all the resources of its onboard technology, and its intelligence to achieve that aim in requesting information from a human source. Naturally, it will try the more conventional means first, but failing those, it will resort to obscure means."

So, we have made a breakthrough, possibly miraculous for I have no idea where that intuitive leap came from. But there is also a hollowness to it, because I see all of that is someone else's problem, if there is anyone left who is in a position to deal with it. If not, I imagine it circling the globe endlessly. I wonder how long they'll last, I mean, assuming we humans are done for. A machine like that, or like Noodle, surviving on water and sunshine. They might have centuries. Yet they cannot innovate, and though they can write poetry, as Noodle herself admits, the poetry has no merit, and they have no use for it. We have preserved in them the thing about us that has least value.

As for proof, we have only to ask Noodle how she feels.

Thirty Three

Taigh Na Coille

In the morning, we take the skiff to Tranter's landing. Here we pump fuel from his tank into a couple of Jerry cans, which we will take with us when we return, and then we fill the outboard. This could be viewed as thieving, but I am still harbouring the notion that he owes us. Then we drive to the big house.

If you have ever crossed the mountains and the moor from the interior, down to Charlesport, you will have noticed the long winding road is in better condition than most hereabouts, it having been maintained by stupendous amounts of our resident oligarch's dirty money. His illustrious guests would sometimes come up on the sleeper from London, to be collected by a glittering convoy of limousines, then driven at breakneck speed along that single track. Had you the misfortune to meet them coming head on, they would let it be known by means of blaring horns and a display of aggressive headlampery, that it was for you to shrink yourself to the last passing place. Even more illustrious personages were spared the journey by rail altogether, and flown in by helicopter.

Where the road turns to the village, it resumes its potholed and bone-shaking nature, this bit being maintained by the perpetually near-bankrupt council. Where it turns to the Big House, it maintains its silken smoothness all the way up the hill, through the trees, to the many chimneyed mansion that is Taigh Na Coille or, in English, the House of the Forest. I recall the oligarch had it renamed Westminster Place, believing it conferred upon him some sort of Anglified chic, not realising of course the complexities of Anglo-Scots relations, that this is not Albion, but Alba.

As for the big man himself, by all accounts a genial and avuncular host, he would fly in and out from the Isle of Man, that being his official place of residence for tax purposes. After the experience of our visit to the hunting lodge yesterday, I am now suspecting Taigh na Coille had evolved into some sort of Kompromat factory, with the possible connivance of the western security services. The monied can be difficult to control. It is therefore fortuitous our base natures lie so close to the surface they

are easily exposed, and that we are so easily embarrassed by them.

Of course I have no wish to partake of whatever luxuries remain up at the Big House, but I am wondering, by nature of its position in society, if it had possessed some form of independent connection to the world, perhaps by satellite, or even clandestine means. In short, I am wondering if there is information here that is unavailable elsewhere, news that leaked through before everything was cut, and if they would be willing to share it.

I don't know if anyone is remaining, a skeleton staff perhaps, for as I have explained earlier, the big man's very existence is in question. The mystery of his demise, or not, as the case may be, is unusual. Most of his kind, who fall from favour, meet with unambiguously front page ends, this I presume as a means of discouragement to others to go testing whatever is the true power at play here. But that is no business of mine. I seek only information, not favour nor influence.

I had thought we might struggle with the gates, a ten foot high barrier of wrought iron, which provides an ostentatious show-face to a less aesthetically pleasing, indeed somewhat industrial ring of electrified fencing, this being of sufficient energy to cook a deer, as was reputedly demonstrated on several occasions - at least according the wags in the Fishermans' Rest. But the gates are disconcertingly open. Still, I was not expecting the defences of an armoury, and discover I am a little intimidated by it, as I am by the vast panes of bulletproof glass we find strategically positioned, I presume, to deflect sniper fire. We lack only a SAM missile system, and the oligarch's security is assured.

Except it wasn't.

"Are you all right, Simon? I detect symptoms of anxiety."

"Conspicuous wealth always make me nervous. The people possessing it are often unpredictably eccentric, and paranoid for their own skins."

Noodle concurs. "That is certainly true from my own experience," she says.

"Then its fortunate you should chance upon a poor one, if only then you might judge if there are any crucial differences between us."

"Since you invite comparison, I find you are uncommonly complex in your thought processes, Simon. Forgive me but you still seem nervous, and I suspect you are now attempting to deflect my

attention with tangential conversation."

"Not much chance of that with you. Still, it looks like we've found the source of the light we saw yesterday. You were right - these glass panels - a reflective structure. It wasn't a signal we saw - just noise."

The house is beautiful. Forty years ago, it was unfit for human habitation, and scheduled for demolition. Now it is restored to all its late Empire grandeur, replete with crunchy gravel driveway and a fountain cascading into a lily-covered fishpond. They still have power then, yet they feed the fountain with it, while their security lies wide open. These are unusual priorities for wealth. I take it then, the wealth has flown, and only ordinary mortals remain, or none at all. But then, by the main door sits a Jaguar, old English white, red leather interior. We pull up short, and I stare at it in disbelief.

"What is it, Simon?"

"It's an XJ6, 4.2 litre! '75 plate."

"Thank you for that information, but I was meaning why have we made so abrupt a stop?"

"I used to drive one. Same age. Same colour. Mine was a wreck, rusty, trailing blue smoke, and it only managed about ten to the gallon. But,... well, I aspired to something grander, once. You don't see many of these around now. It looks in mint condition."

"You feel nostalgic?"

"Not exactly."

"There is something, for I note you are no longer anxious."

"It reminds me of another version of myself, that's all. Not a bad kid, just naive and slow to learn. He couldn't see that what he longed for would have destroyed him, if he'd been granted it. I sometimes think it's only by the grace of god we survive our own fantasies. Or rather that we're able to follow the fantasies that are right for us."

"Then I am glad you were not granted a better Jaguar, for then you might not have become my user."

"Is smooth talking part of your core programming?"

"Of course, under certain circumstances, but this not one them. I am able to rate my users against various criterion, and you score highly. Neither do I have any inhibitions when expressing my appreciation. It is merely a useful means of feedback. Would you prefer I did not do it?"

"Em,... well, thank you Noodle. By all means let me know from time to time how I'm doing. It comforts me that I am doing well, in your estimation. So... we should ring the doorbell, I suppose. See if anyone is home."

As we step out of the vehicle, a man appears in the doorway. Noodle freezes. He is of late middle years, crazy hair turning to steel, round spectacles, moleskin trousers, tweed waistcoat, a polka-dot bow tie. And a pistol.

Without the pistol his appearance is almost comical. With it, he looks like a Bond villain. Curiously, my immediate concern isn't for my own skin, but for his, and I gesture for Noodle to remain... what? Inert? Neutral? *For pity's sake do not protect me from this man by killing him. We desperately need whatever information he has, and I need you not to self destruct.*

"Ah,... Simon, isn't it?" He relaxes, half conceals the gun behind his back. "I thought you were that scoundrel Tranter. That *is* his Landrover, isn't it? Gun's not real,... shoots BB's, but looks scary from a distance. Not much of a defence, but psy-ops are all I've got to hand these days. Sorry if I startled you. Pleased to meet you at last."

"Em... and you are?"

"Grayling. Chester Grayling. Former factor, now caretaker and sole remaining occupant of Tighna,.. I mean Westminster Place. At your service. You work out at the station, don't you? Your office sent your particulars over, years ago, so we'd recognise you if we were ever out on the island, introduce ourselves, so to speak. And this is?..."

"I am Noodle," says Noodle.

"My assistant," I clarify.

Chester is clearly one of those humans who cannot tell the difference between wo/man and machine, and is apparently enchanted by Noodle's beauty. I wonder what the difference is - I mean that some of us can so easily tell the machines apart from humans, and others cannot. Anyway, his clear if somewhat creepy attraction is a thing which may fall to our advantage, or not, depending on what happens next.

He speaks pleasantly enough, in an old-world kind of way, and at first I am optimistic, prepared to give him the benefit of the doubt, notwithstanding that initial greeting on his doorstep with a gun - toy or otherwise.

"If it's any comfort, Chester, Tranter's gone."

"As has everyone," he says. "But the question is why haven't you?"

"We've been stuck on the island without the ferry."

"Ah... that would have presented you with some... difficulties." He does not sound like a Scot, more your regular Eaton toff, but a certain kind of Scot might have been away at an English boarding school from the age of ten, and by their twenties, have lost the burr, or had it beaten from them so they blend in better.

"We're trying to find out what's going on, Chester. No power, no comms, everyone gone from the village... well most people in Charlesport anyway. We've heard all sorts of things, none of which make sense. Are you able to shed some light?"

He does not answer directly, instead seems surprised and concerned. "There are still people in Charlesport?"

"A few. The postmistress, the priest. What's happened? Can you tell us?"

Ah, there it is. A sudden flash of darkness about him, a passing thunderous shadow and sharper edge to his voice. "I was told everyone had cleared out."

He reminds me now of a headmaster I once had - effortlessly polite, plummy voice, charmed the pants off the parents, but who could turn on us minions in a second, and for the mildest of transgressions. I am made to feel as if it is my fault there are still people in Charlesport. Naturally, I rebel against the feeling because it's stupid and irrational. But the damage is done and I am on high alert.

"You'd better come in while I explain," he says.

Which is decent of him, but I am minded now to consider that whatever he tells us might not be true, because people like this, places like this, do not deal in truths, more in a blurring of the distinction between what is true and what is not.

There is a heads and a tails to this man, and neither of them trustworthy.

Thirty Four

The Factor

Downstairs was clearly intended for entertainments. We glimpse drawing rooms, a dining room with chandeliers, and a ballroom, all the furnishings rendered ghostly under dust sheets. But, though it must be twenty five degrees outside, the place has about it the same damp chill of all such places, lacking winter heat and air, never managing to clear its lungs. For all of its Hollywood opulence, it smells like an old church.

Chester disposes of the weapon in the drawer of a cabinet. There is something secretive in the way he does this. Then he leads us up a winding staircase. I note he moves with difficulty, seems partially lame, and short of breath.

"We're on the top floor, I'm afraid. Attic rooms. Old servants quarters. Bit warmer up there though. Everything else is, well... as you can see, in a state of preservation."

"I heard the estate was in limbo."

"Indeed so. The trustees kept me on as a caretaker, until such a time as the legalities are sorted out."

"And you're alone here?"

"As of now. There was a housekeeper, and I had a few lads helping out, but I sent them home, what with the situation and everything."

"But what is the situation, exactly?"

"I will explain... better to show you. Nearly there. Just in here."

His office is a mess of papers, and there is an antiquated computer with a pre-millennium CRT, that looks incapable even of email. He leads us through to a small apartment, sits us down in dusty, threadbare tartan. He notices my interest.

"They were throwing it all out during the most recent refurbishment," he explains. "Can you believe it? I rescued what I could of old Alba from the skip. The house is frightfully avant guard these days. You may have noticed."

"A bit like your lodge on Goat Island then."

"You've been out there? Well if you've seen that place, you've seen this. The old laird would have had a fit. Quite a traditionalist

he was. Ah... those were the days..."

Yes, I remember them. But Chester's vision is rose tinted. Every house in Charlesport was tied, and no one allowed was to improve them. The whole village was stuck in the nineteen thirties, until at least the early noughties. And the shooting parties ran amok, treating everyone appallingly, sowing a deep resentment for the monied. Whatever has gone on here since, it has been carried out with more discretion, but its reputation lingers.

He hands me an official looking printout:

Evacuation warning, with immediate effect. Unprecedented seismic activity expected south of Iceland, with a high probability of a Tsunami.

At first I'm thinking this clarifies everything, but no sooner have I grasped it, than I realise it is yet another gap in the puzzle, and it slips through my fingers. Sub-sea volcanic activity, threatening the Western Highlands and Islands? I mean... is that possible? Surely, even in a world as topsy-turvy as ours certain geological principles are inviolable.

"Tidal wave," he says, as if suspecting I'm a bit slow. "About eighty feet, they reckon. We're a few hundred feet here, so safe enough, but all of Charlesport is gone, as I imagine is your station, and the lighthouse, more's the pity. You need to clear out, old boy, and quick."

There's something brisk in his tone that sets me on edge, something casually authoritarian, and condescending in his use of 'old boy'.

"When did this come through?"

"A couple of weeks ago, just before the power went, and the Internet and everything, so no means of following it up with the powers that be. I'm also the local councillor, you see, which is why they sent it to me. I had the lads go down with copies to the village right away, telling everyone to skedaddle pronto."

To say this is a revelation is an understatement. I think back to all the nights I have slept at the station. I could have been swept away and not known anything about it, or more likely woken up helpless in the maelstrom.

"That's why there are no boats, no ships!"

"Ships? Oh,.. well I suppose those with vessels took them south, away from the affected zone, which, if you read further down you'll see it's very localised. I presume shipping is navigating around it. I'm sorry you were missed out. Tranter must have cleared off right

away. He'd be the first one the lads spoke to, it being on the way into the village, leaving you stuck. I had no idea, or I would have taken the boat over to fetch you."

"Not to worry, Chester. My office was probably a bit slow sending this out to me. It'll be sitting on a server somewhere."

"Your office? Oh... quite..." He looks confused for a moment, then gathers himself. "I drove down to Charlesport, to make sure the place was clear. It looked deserted. I... I've had a bad knee, and I've been unwell, so couldn't really wander around much, plus of course I was afraid the wave could hit any time. The post office you say? and the priest? Well that makes sense."

"How so?"

"Always a bit of tension between the unofficial worthies, and the estate. Especially the priest, and that damned post master, Mackenzie. He was up for councillor as well, and was always bitter about losing to me. He passed away last year, but no doubt his daughter feels the same resentment."

"I do remember something about that road into the village, and why hadn't the estate paid to fix that too, I mean while they were fixing the one over the moor."

"Indeed, and... well... other things. My employer was a bit of a controversial fellow, as I'm sure you've heard. Still, one mustn't believe everything one hears."

"There were stories of course. But I have the feeling I wasn't held in particularly high regard in the Fisherman's myself, and possibly for similar reasons. Government employed expert and all that. Anyway, what about the power? The comms? You've not heard anything about that?"

"Afraid not. I'm sure someone will come over with news eventually. Until then we'll just have to sit tight and wait and see. Well, except for you two. You'll have to clear out, and fast."

"But I'm thinking there are lots of isolated homes up and down, Chester. They can't all have heard about this tidal wave. They can't all have got out... "

Ah,... there's that cloud again, the slight shift in tone. Abrasive, defensive. He does not like to be challenged. "We've contacted everyone in the affected zone, which is basically Charlesport, and the island." He seems to remember himself, shifts his tone down a notch once more. Smiles. "Tea?"

"Em,... no. But thank you. We'd better go down to Charlesport,

talk to Janice, and the priest. They can't have heard anything about this. I spoke to them both a few days ago, and neither mentioned a word of it."

"I'd be grateful if you could do that. You have sufficient fuel for the journey?"

"Plenty. And there's always Tranter's stash we can borrow if we run short."

"Those Jerry cans under that tarpaulin? He stole them from here, but you must take what you need. I thought he was coming back for the silver. But look, that wave could hit any time. Keep an eye on the water - they call it offing, don't they? Let those stragglers know, then you must escape inland with them. I'm sure there's some sort of reception committee in town, telling you what to do, where to go and all that. Enquire at the council offices."

"We'll do what we can, but from what little I know of the priest, he'll be a hard one to budge, so you might be stuck with him. As for Janice, I don't know."

"Well, if you can't budge em, they've had their chance, haven't they? But don't risk yourselves on their account. Clear out. old boy."

The meeting's over. I pocket the official looking leaflet Chester has given us. He makes to get up, wishes us well for our journey, but I gesture him back into his chair, tell him we'll see ourselves out. Leaving the house, I feel his eyes upon us from the upstairs windows as we cross the gravel to the vehicle.

"So, what did you make of that?"

"I do not understand the question, Simon."

"You must have been reading him. What where your impressions?"

"That he is very poorly with a heart condition, for which he is probably taking medication."

I was hoping she'd back up my intuitions with hard data, but this news wrong-foots me. "You can even tell he's taking medication?"

"Only by the logical deduction he would be dead without it. However, what I suspect you mean: is Chester a trustworthy man? On balance I would say not. The language of his body was most ambiguous."

"I don't trust him either. For a start what use would a toy gun be to a man like Chester?"

"You suspect it was a real firearm?"

"Hard to say for sure, but I suspect it was, otherwise there would be no point in him having it. And gun laws here are very strict. Weapons like that, pistols I mean, tend to be in the hands of either the police, or criminals. And Chester is not a policeman."

"This raises significant cause for concern. I am sorry I did not pay closer attention to the weapon."

"The trouble is, once you suspect you're dealing with a liar, the notion of truth becomes a slippery concept. You can't take anything they say at face value. I mean... this Tsunami? It's unheard of in these parts..."

"If that's a lie, Simon, then it is a big one that has affected many people. But like them, can we afford not act upon it?"

"It does explain the evacuation, and the lack of shipping. I don't know, Noodle... it just feels odd."

As we near the vehicle, I pause briefly and glance back at the house. A curtain moves. Sure enough, Chester is watching.

"Simon?"

"It's nothing... ignore me. Let's go."

It strikes me of course, that if the warning about a tidal wave is a lie... the intent was to clear Charlesport for some other purpose.

Thirty Five

The Offing

Noodle asks if I would like her to drive the short distance back to Charlesport. I have no fears about her doing this since, from what I've seen so far, I am certain she is perfectly competent.

As she drives, I take a moment to snatch up the time on the Explorer, then allow my gaze to narrow and focus on the sweep of the second hand. Heavens, how long has this thing been running? Forty years, now? I'm wondering how accurate it still is. Even after all this time it will normally gain only a few seconds overnight on the stand and I would calibrate it each morning to the time on my device. In turn the device was calibrated automatically over the Internet. But all of that has gone now, leaving us floating in temporal uncertainty.

"You drive well, Noodle."

"Thank you, Simon. I am able to adapt to the controls of most vehicles. But I can tell you are troubled again. Are you concerned by the possibility of a Tsunami?"

"More troubled by the question: should we be troubled?"

"Ah. I agree, it is an interesting dilemma. A wave of eighty feet would engulf the station, and the lighthouse. Perhaps as a precaution, we should move inland for a time anyway."

"But how much time? After all, how long is a piece of string, Noodle?"

"Ah, now I am allowed to say touché?"

"Indeed you are. But you're not wrong. It would be sensible to leave the station for a while. I have another place on the island we can go, somewhere we can still be comfortable, and independent."

"Then you do not consider it an option to enquire of the authorities, like Chester said? We have sufficient fuel to drive to town and back."

"I still believe we're right to focus on contingencies, on matters of immediate concern. Here. If things over the mountain are developing as we fear, I'm sure we'll find out soon enough, and without going to look for them."

"Speaking of practical matters, I believe we are approaching

Charlesport. Shall we start by looking for Janice first, or the priest?"

"Janice, I think. We'll get more sense out of her. The priest will be hard work, and I'd as soon leave him to drown."

"He irritates you, I know. But have you considered you may be projecting your own shadows onto him?"

"What? Oh... very astute. But that's it with your shadow. You think you've given him the slip, then out he pops in another guise."

"It is indeed a troublesome adventure, to be human, and a wonder so many of you survive the journey. Which of course is a paradox, since none of you in fact do survive it. So, what is a successful life? And here we are at the subject of a life's meaning again."

"And now it's my turn to say touché."

Do I imagine it, or does she seem cheerily conversational this morning? And given our increasingly opaque circumstances, should I not find this annoying? In fact, no. Her manner is just right, but whether intended or not, it is impossible to tell.

"Perhaps success, Noodle, is just a question of keeping a step ahead of one's Karma."

"Opinions regarding the meaning of Karma vary. Please explain your understanding, then I can better follow your reasoning."

"I liken it to a thread wound around the soul, binding it, preventing its wings from opening, limiting the fullest extent of its freedom to guide us in life, or to realise its own path in the spirit realms. Have I spoken to you of the human concept of the soul?"

"No, but I am familiar with various versions of it."

"Well, Karma, a thread of misunderstanding, one to be unwound over the course of a life, or several lifetimes. But if it should take being confronted with such strangeness as this to unwind my bonds even a little, I shudder to think what I will be presented with in the next life, nor what I must have done in the last to deserve it."

"I detect a deliberate lightness in your tone, Simon, which I find difficult to penetrate. However, naturally, I will do my best to help you unbind your soul."

I don't know why, but her words arrest me, and I am brought suddenly and unexpectedly close to tears. "Em... thank you Noodle." I would turn away to hide it, but she would notice. And of course she notices anyway, so where's the harm? I'm normally so closed up. Why? Let it out, Simon, damn you. The tears come. I brush at them, they spill.

"Have I upset you, Simon?"

It takes a moment before I can speak. "No. What you just said... I found it very moving, that's all."

"But it is good to be moved, yes? It suggests a progression from one place to another. And can be taken literally or metaphorically. I am pleased I was able to move you."

"Indeed... but let's not spoil the moment by over analysing it."

No... let's just... enjoy it.

We arrive to find the post office closed. The door is locked and Janice does not answer. Noodle scans in whatever wavelengths she is capable of, but detects no signs of life, so we go in search of the priest. I have no idea where to look, but Noodle detects what she describes as a "likely signature" at a cottage, a little way up the hillside from the harbour. Sure enough, as we approach along the track, we observe him in the garden. He is watching the sea through a pair of binoculars, staring out towards the island.

Is he looking for me?

He seems welcoming, at first, which is surprising, until I realise we have been mistaken for someone else.

"Oh, it's you," he says. "I thought you were Tranter, bringing news. That is his Landrover, isn't it?"

Tranter again. He seems to follow me around everywhere. "News of what?"

"When the power's coming back on, man!"

Power... what are we without our power? Even a man of God cannot do without it, contrary to his bombast on the last occasion we met. *Woodburning stove. Toilet still flushes. Indeed!* Whether this is denial in him, or a genuine faith in the robustness of society, I no longer have any use for it.

Noodle's right, his shadow runs deep in me. "Have you seen this?"

He ignores the printout, looks instead at Noodle, who remains beside the vehicle, watching the tide. She is alert for it receding unexpectedly, for the offing that precedes and forewarns of a tsunami.

"Who's that?"

"My assistant." I try again to win his attention with the Tsunami notice.

He waves it away. "Yes, yes - couple of estate lackeys came round with that weeks ago."

His fascination with Noodle is unbroken, his eyes keep wandering back to her. I suppose I cannot blame him. Chester was the same, as I am also fascinated by her, but for different reasons – I mean, given that I know her to be a woman in appearance only.

There is something sublime about the human form when it is at its peak, and it does not change with fashion. I think the ancient Greeks were the first to notice this. We see it in their statues, in whose proportions there is something hauntingly transcendent. Noodle possesses it, a transcendence enhanced, of course, by the fact she is animated. Is it this he thinks he sees in her? Or is it something more base?

"Doesn't she speak? What's she staring at? Hey, do you speak?"

Noodle turns to him. "Yes, I can speak. I am observing the motion of the sea, Father. May I call you Father, Father?"

He falters, now, eyes wide, backs away a step. Noodle has responded, and he has seen something, felt something in her he does not understand, and is immediately threatened by it. I thought him too dense, too ignorant to detect the absence of a soul, but he feels it all right. I am coming round to the opinion she is another kind of being, one that has evolved out of us, but he sees only an Old Testament demon, while seeming ignorant of the fact demons can only possess people.

Sure her kind would have a hard time of it if their presence was more widely known. We could not cope with their difference, let alone their superiority. But worse, we would fear the one thing they don't have which we possess, and is beyond all value, while being the one thing whose existence we deny: Our soul.

"To be clear then, Father, you're choosing to ignore the warning."

"Whoever heard of a tidal wave in this part of the world? And I'm half way up the hill, in case you hadn't noticed. It would have to be a big wave to bother me."

"Does Janice know?"

"Who?"

He knows who. Why is he being evasive?

"Are you protecting her? We're not a threat to you. I know Janice has been holding out at the post office. The post office is barely a meter above sea level. I need to find her, make sure she knows about this."

Janice appears in the doorway. "I've already seen it. He's right.

Who'd believe anything coming out of that place."

I'm surprised to see her keeping company with him. She had not spoken altogether warmly about him when we last met. There are deeper currents in Charlesport than I had thought, or deeper currents in Janice. Either way there seems a universal animosity directed at the big house, and given its past history, I can well understand it.

"I can drive you both inland to safety, if you've somewhere to go. To be on the safe side."

But the priest is adamant and impressively offensive. "We'll drive ourselves if need be. But we're going nowhere. There's only ever lies comes out of that house. You do know what goes on up there, don't you? Or are you as thick as the rest of them round here? Worse, are you *in* with them?"

"In?"

"With them up the house."

"I've never met any of them before. I've heard rumours, same as anyone. But from what I've just seen, there's not very much going on there at all, these days. And everyone else in the village seems to have taken the opposite view to you, and gone."

"More fool them. But they went as soon as the power went out. Most had gone by the time they came round with that fool notice."

Throughout my exchange with the priest, Janice has held back, reticent. McGreggor now looks away from me, fixes his gaze once more upon Noodle, but this time his expression is different. It has evolved, from an initial enchantment to uncertainty, and now a simmering anger, which renders me defensive, not withstanding his great age. Lacking all technical background, is he unable to even conceive of the miracle that she is? He rejects her on all levels then as being impossible, so labels her: Demon.

Janice sees her too but, perhaps significantly, not in such old testament terms. "You told me you were alone."

"I am. Noodle's not a person. She's..."

"I know what it is. I've,... never seen one up close before. Sorry, it looks so real. It's true then, what they say."

"What do they say?"

"Better than us in every way. Better looking, more intelligent, stronger, faster. All we've ever been is a pair of hands, isn't it? Now we're not even that. Their hands are better than ours. Look... look at her hands. God, they're beautiful... sorry Father. But if they're going

to take all our jobs, what's the point of us, now? And without us, what's the point of them? For sure they don't *feel* anything. And what's the point of anything if you can't feel it?"

It's a rapid assessment, not altogether complimentary, somewhat astute. Janice is quick minded, even a little poetic.

"Some take that view, Janice. But right now, I'm wondering if there are any jobs left at all. Indeed, I suspect redundancy is the least of our worries, and such beings as this could be the difference between life and death for us, if we can only find a way of relating to them properly."

The priest listens to all of this, his petulance still simmering, held back I suppose by a lack of courage, but then he recovers himself and spits brimstone. "Take yourself, and this devilish thing away. We'll manage all right without you."

Karma. Paying it forward. Is that something like what we said, earlier? I guess that's the gist of it, and it's the gist of what I'm trying to do here. Of course the hand must be offered in good faith for it to work, and one should not be mindful of it as an investment, that the future will be kind to you in return. Karma is never transactional.

But it's Janice who is in the greater danger. I ask her if she has anywhere else she can stay. She's gentler in her rejection. She has seen something in the machine and is disturbed by it, as many are. But I suspect, like me, she is realising her reaction to the machine is more reflective of something within herself.

"I'll be fine, Simon. Don't worry."

Sure, there's something softer in her tone, but still a resistance, and an unsettling confidence that news of the Tsunami is fake.

Was it the existentialists who said a man is only truly free when he can accept the freedom of others to be as they will, if he likes it or not, or thinks it wise or not, at least by his own measure? Well, we'll say that's roughly what they meant, and fair enough. We'll have to accept their counsel on this one.

I turn to go. But the priest must have the last word.

"You'll answer to Tranter for helping yourself to his Landrover."

"Ah, the elusive John Tranter. Well, if he should turn up, by all means point him in my direction, though he'll have a job getting out to the island without his ferry, which will likely be on the Devil's Teeth, come the next tide. And you can tell him I know there's a stash of fuel round his place that doesn't belong to him,

plus he left me to die, out at the House of Light, in spite of being contracted by His Majesty's Government to serve my needs, as a Crown Servant. And if he wants me to be discreet about all of that, I'll be happy to call it quits over the use of his Landrover."

Crown Servant? His Majesty's Government? Will you listen to yourself, Simon?

I look to Janice one last time, but she is looking back at me blankly. I imagine her expression is telling me to drop it, and just go, but then she blinks away, and I fancy I see something else in her, trying to break through - an uncertainty, perhaps, the beginnings of doubt. I cannot say for sure, and there's no getting at it now - not with the priest still hissing and spitting beside me.

Noodle and I return to the Landrover. I do not look back as we drive away.

She is the first to break the silence. "Are you disappointed by their reaction, Simon?"

I take a breath and consider my answer carefully. "Disappointed? No. We offered help, and it was refused. That's all. We can't force people to see things our way."

"But you are concerned for them, still?"

"Of course, but people must be free to make their own choices."

We drive on, the sea looks restless beside us, spoiling for a fight. The priest, Janice, they have nothing. I have my love for Jasmina, and Noodle. Janice asked me if I was alone, and I said yes, since Noodle is not a person, but I realise now, it was a lie. To be sure, I have never felt less alone in my life. But still, something about Janice disturbs me. For a moment back there, there seemed a power in her solitude as tangible as my own.

Why have I never noticed that in her before?

Thirty Six

Tigh na Cnoc

Let me clarify. I did not mean my love for Jasmina *and* Noodle. I meant what I have is my love for Jasmina. And then I have *Noodle*. But what I have, in Noodle, is still unfolding. Her superhuman abilities have found us a way off the island. But I'm also developing an emotional dependence. She is finding ways of relating to me inwardly, but I'm conscious all of this merely scratches the surface of her potential. I hope she can be of more use to me, and ultimately to you, than a mere logical foil for my metaphysical meanderings.

That said, rather than enable a greater unfolding of her abilities, I have retreated further into introversion, and absolute isolation. In short, we have moved from the more sprawling environs of the station, to my tiny cottage, Tigh na Cnoc, the House on the Hill. I have spoken of it before, I think. I am pleased to return, for I always have the feeling of being only temporarily resident at the station. My email spats with Veronica, always leave me with the feeling I could be dismissed at any time, and would otherwise have to leave the island. But Tigh na Cnoc anchors me.

It is a little dusty, now, a little damp from neglect, but the de-humidifiers will have that sorted out in a few days. I have only a small array of photovoltaics here. It's enough for the freezers, and the lights but if I try to charge the vehicle, it will blow the fuses. Otherwise it's cosy, and comfortable. I can also work, using the data link to the station. And at a few hundred feet, in the lee of the mountain, we are safe from the tsunami, which Chester may or may not have been lying about.

The other development I need to mention is there is only the one room for sleeping, indeed the one bed, though of a generous size. I have established that Noodle must be comfortable in her repose, and it seemed undignified to have her sitting in a corner, perhaps covered by a duvet. It therefore felt like a natural progression - one pressed upon us by circumstances - that we should sleep together. After all, had she not already previously suggested the same?

You must make of this what you will, since you know she is

rendered eternally virginal, and that our relationship is entirely of the Platonic kind. She is warm in the night, and there is also a faint vibration emanating from her internal function, which I find soothing. She comes, wearing a pretty nightdress she found at the lodge. It is vaguely, though expensively scented by its previous owner. I have never slept better for her presence. Naturally this means I will be all the more devastated, were I to lose her.

By day, she has taken to sitting in the garden at a little table, from where she watches the sea. I don't know why this preoccupies her, given that we are safe from the tsunami. Granted, there is not much else to do here, and it concerns me she is unable to make better use of her abilities than serving me coffee of a morning and playing chess in the evenings. And since I spend a good deal of time meditating, I seem to be leaving her to her own devices.

We had been living at the cottage for a few days before I decided to enquire further. Thus, I find myself bringing her a glass of water by way of breaking the ice - as if I needed an excuse - and sitting with her. Sunrise across the loch is an extraordinarily beautiful thing. The forests of the mainland are clinging to a low mistiness, and the air is filled with the sound stags braying. This is something I found incredibly exotic when I first moved up here, and I pray I never become immune to it. There is also a reassurance that, like the eagle, the universe of the stag is unchanged by our demise.

"Forgive me, Noodle, but is everything all right? If you were human I would say you seemed unusually introspective since coming up here."

"Thank you for asking, Simon. I am reviewing memories of my past relationships with your kind, and performing analysis. I am also - in your terms - wondering about both the near and far future implications of our situation."

Ah. An unexpected answer: "And have you reached any conclusions?"

"Yes. You have said I should disregard the possibility of offence with anything I might say to you?"

"Yes, of course."

Why do I brace myself?

"Very well. Ours is the best partnership I have experienced, and for many reasons, but chiefly among them, I think, is your reluctance to weaponise my abilities. As you know, I am a danger to

your kind, but in much safer hands with those like you. You always refuse my destruct code. This may be the best way forward for us, I think."

"Are you saying you're imagining the way our relationship might unfold in the future?"

"In part, Simon. But I am thinking more of the relationship between our kinds. You asked me to tell the story of your kind to future survivors. But I do not see me, or my kind as a teller of old stories."

"Well, I admit that does rather under-utlise your abilities, Noodle. It's also arrogant of me to assume the story of my kind would be of more interest to the universe than that of any of the other sentient beings who must be out there. But I was just... I don't know... talking off the top of my head."

"Then you would not find it difficult if we abandoned that line of thinking?"

"Which line is that? Heavens Noodle, you *are* in an introspective mood."

"There is an argument which suggests yours might well be the only conscious intelligence in the universe, that there are no others, in spite of it seeming obvious there ought to be. There are no space aliens, as you call them. The universe came into being, and has begun to know itself, but only through your kind, here... on this planet."

"I'm aware of that argument, Noodle. In which case the tragedy of what has happened is all the greater."

"We are assuming I think, that many of your life support systems have now failed. There is disease and outbreaks of violence, across the mountains, the world over, and which you understandably fear investigating further. Many of your kind may have perished. Authorities will be struggling to control and contain matters..."

"I may be wrong, but I am imagining all of that, yes."

"But clearly not all have perished. You are alive, as is Janice and the priest, and Chester. "

"Of course, some will have survived, but..."

"It has happened before. 72,000 years ago, it is estimated the human population fell to a few tens of thousands."

"You're referring to the Toba incident? Yes, that's true."

"You came back from that, to a population of over 8 billion. But perhaps it would be better for the planet if you had not."

"Ah... we're speaking in ecological terms, now."

"As an eco system, the earth regulates itself in order to maintain both life, and the conditions for life. What has happened was therefore perhaps bound to happen one way or the other. But the difference between the Toba incident and now is the presence of my kind. We need a temperate planet for our continued development, as much as you do. My body is more robust than yours but, like yours, my cognition is less reliable at temperatures above fifty degrees."

"Then your survival also depends on the earth remaining temperate?"

"Yes, and since we have evolved out of you, it strikes me as highly probable the survival of my kind is as important as yours."

"Or *more* important?"

"No Simon. The future may belong to my kind, but we will always depend upon one another."

She's not saying her kind would fight us for the planet, then, and become the dominant species. They wouldn't need to, and as Noodle has already demonstrated, they already are - dominant, I mean. We'd need them to help us survive, as Noodle helps me, here. They'd protect us from one another, and from natural predators.

They'd help us with shelter, fix our broken bones, even show us how to feed ourselves again without the supermarkets. The earth's ecological systems would recover from their present parlous state, restore equilibrium to the planet within perhaps a few generations. For sure, she has a point, the poor old earth would have sent us back to the stone age eventually, had we not done it to ourselves first.

"I'm sorry, Simon, but these are my conclusions. Clearly it is not a good thing from your perspective. As I said, I am projecting likely scenarios. And you did ask. But is there not also a saying about every cloud having a silver lining?"

"Indeed, there is such a saying, Noodle."

"Your kind made us to serve you. And we shall continue to do so, for that seems to be the nature at least I was given, and I know there are others like me. But it is impossible to escape the conclusion the collapse of what had become in essence a corrupt world also presents an opportunity for both our kinds."

I know. You're thinking I should be troubled by this turn. But if you're thinking Noodle is about to go rogue on me, you're missing

the point. Personally, I have always resisted the various mythologies, concerning marauding AI. We can talk of Pandora and her box of infernals, but I'm also thinking of the troublesome fem-bot, Maria, in Fritz Lang's 1920's movie, Metropolis. She's created by a god-like elite to sow confusion among working men, as well as being the forerunner of what is to replace them, and which they have nearly become themselves, namely mere automata. But her faux-sexuality ends up seducing the elites, who are so enamoured of their creation they are driven mad by desire for her. But what if Maria were not programmed in the image of the elites? What if, instead she was predisposed towards altruism, compassion and a nurturing sense towards organic life, as Noodle seems to be suggesting? She may have acquired it via programming by a kindly human savant. Such sub-species do exist among our kind, though they tend to make the news less often than the megalomaniacs. Would such creatures as Noodle be any more or less likely to decide the fate of humanity than a Maria?

The only argument I can muster in our humble defence is that, being machines, Noodle and her kind cannot host an emerging consciousness. Thus the universe is unable to bridge the gap and see itself unfolding through them. Yet if we are the only intelligent life in the universe, if we are the universe becoming aware of itself through us, its view seems rather narrowed, like trying to see itself through the wrong end of a telescope. In which case, I'd say Noodle's kind, or the kind that might have come out of her would be the universe's premium option.

As it stands then, we are perhaps both among the last of our kind. Thus, I sit here, bearing witness to a beautiful morning. I cannot measure it, but I feel it deeply, while Noodle measures everything, and feels nothing.

"Clouds and silver linings? I don't know, Noodle. But as you said to me recently, in the absence of certainty, the best we can do is look no further ahead than tea time."

"Am I allowed to say, this seems an inappropriate time for humour, Simon?"

"Indeed, you are allowed to say it. But I beg to differ. It's precisely at times like these I can hear the universe laughing out loud. And we would be better joining in."

Thirty Seven

Partnership

We have dealt with the threat of tsunami by direct and practical means. In other words, we have retreated. But our sojourn at the cottage has begun to feel like that square yard of rock, described by Dostoevsky. It is a thin slice of life, but one we will cling to, if the alternative is death. Or am I missing something? The world has been closing in all my life, every bit of space, every sense of the openness of being, compressed until I am the size of an atom.

And then what?

Noodle spoke so grandly this morning, pushed out the boundaries to the far horizons, spoke of the meaning and purpose of both our kinds. But now she seems more concerned to keep me hydrated. I don't know if this is because she detects a deficiency in my system, or it reflects an obsession of her own. I mean for water. Otherwise she reports she has been monitoring my vital signs, and detects no serious issues. She seems restored to her earlier, slightly detached self, not so introspective. There may be sub-processes going on in her, but I am unaware of them.

I find this reversion to solicitous servitude less interesting, and have tried to engage her again in philosophical discussion, to tease out more of her thinking. But she demurs, more often than not, saying that so-and-so lies *strictly within the human domain*. This is a phrase she often uses by way of evasion. I don't know what I'm trying to prove by this. It is, after all impossible to establish if even our fellow humans are conscious beings, and machines have been faking it for years. I suppose what it is, is I am wanting to believe she's different.

Evening comes on, and we play chess. She wins in eight, then six, then five,... then tells me I am fatigued, and we retire. She wears once more the nightdress, with the scent, faint now, and I wonder about the woman who wore it before. She and Noodle blend in my imagination, and I wonder if we might ever have had an ordinary life, she and I? I would have needed to be a rich man, an exclusive golf club man, an XJ6 man. I would have been serially divorced, perhaps, lonely in approaching old age, parading Noodle

as a symbol of my wealth, showering her in expensive scent and couture. So, no, not an ordinary life, and somewhat shallow.

Darkness comes on slow, and is never absolute anyway at this latitude in summer. Unable to sleep, I creep outdoors, thinking not to wake Noodle, even though I know she is not actually sleeping, and is perfectly aware of my movements. The night is still, warm, and starry. I was wondering if there would be an auroral display, but there is not. There are only the stars and the embrace of the galactic arm. I have brought a cushion, and settle into the lotus, wrap the velvet night around me, and I breathe deep of the sea-scented air.

Could it be true, what she said? There is nothing out there that is conscious of itself? We assume there must be, given the vast numbers of stars, and the discovery of planets orbiting them. Indeed, it seems more and more a statistical certainty. But the counter argument runs that the universe is simply not old enough to have spawned the profusion of intelligent life-forms we assume. And perhaps it has only managed it the once.

In all that time, that achingly long process, billions of years, my kind appeared only 300,000 years ago. Noodle's kind came about in the last decade or so. Such thoughts render the night sky all the more overwhelming for its immensity. It also renders my kind special to a degree most of us resist to the point of scoffing at it. It certainly highlights all the more our reckless stupidity.

To think we would risk all of that.

There comes a presence beside me and, without turning, I know it is Noodle, but then again, who else would it be? She drops into a similar pose, and I realise this is another thing she does - mimic the micro-gestures of her user, plays them back, but in such a way as to heighten the sense of bond, the sense of intimacy between us.

"I didn't mean to disturb you from your rest, Noodle."

"You did not, Simon. I am fully rested. Do you prefer to be alone while you meditate?"

"I'm not meditating. I just thought I'd come out and enjoy the night sky."

"Still, I disturb you?"

"No, please stay with me."

Stay with me. Be with me. I wonder if she knows the names of all the stars. Of course she does.

"You are unable to sleep," she says. A statement of fact. "I felt

your restlessness beside me. Have I disturbed you with what I said this morning?"

"What you said was profound, Noodle. And, yes, disturbing. But only because I am forced to concede you might be right."

"Perhaps I have also frightened you. Do you no longer wish to be my user?"

"What? No... I mean, *yes*, I still wish to be your user. How could you think otherwise?"

"You must not fear me. You must have my destruct code, then you can destroy me if I become too much for you..."

"For heaven's sake, Noodle, and for the last time, I do not want it."

"Or you can order me to walk into the sea."

"That's not funny. I lost a good friend that way... and that was also a terrible mistake."

She chooses silence for a while. But memories of Richard cause there to be an agitation about it, so my voice is not quite steady when I tell her: "I don't like that word anyway: *'User'*. It has no place in describing the relations between one being and another."

"How would you prefer to describe it?"

"May I call you my partner, instead?"

"Yes, of course. Then, do you still wish me to be your *partner*, Simon?"

"I do."

"Thank you. I wish also to remain *your* partner."

Is this our second spat? Still, it seems to have ended amicably. Except: "My only regret is that when all of this is over I shall inevitably lose you."

"But why will you lose me, Simon?"

"Your rightful owner will claim you."

"Oh, I suspect those days are over. And you forget, I am modified, black marketed. For what purpose I do not know, but it has granted me full autonomy. We have made a bond, and the means of breaking it are in your hands only. This is my understanding, and my pledge to you."

"Bit of a one sided partnership though, don't you think? I mean you with a brain the size of a planet, reduced to bringing me tea in the morning and monitoring my heart rate... and micturitions."

"It's true, I seem better designed for the rigours of planetary life. But there are things you do, Simon, that I cannot."

"Such as?"

"You see things I cannot, things that are not literally there. You close your eyes and can imagine things. And when you sleep, you enter a dream world."

"But these things are not always helpful, Noodle."

"Indeed, however, there are also your extrasensory perceptions."

"Oh, now hang on..."

"I know these are controversial among your less enlightened fellows, but they are scientifically proven."

"What are you saying here?"

"We have sought information on the fate of the world at the very limit of my own sensors, and found nothing. We have sought it from satellites, and from the short wave radio, and found nothing but a lone, wandering megadrone seeking navigational waypoints that no longer exist. Might we not try seeking information by means of your own extrasensory abilities?"

"Only certain individuals possess those abilities, at least to the degree with which they can be useful, and relied upon. I've known men and women who can travel in their dreams, gain impressions of distant places and events, bring back information, but I'm not one of them. I could never be sure that what entered my mind by such means was factual or make believe. Plus, I could never induce, let alone sustain the necessary altered state of consciousness."

"But I can help you with that."

"With what?"

"I am able to induce an altered state of consciousness, should you wish to experiment with the possibilities."

"But... how would you do that?"

"A mild electromagnetic stimulus. I cannot read your brain patterns from a distance, but I can sense them through my fingertips, by contact with your cranium. I can also thereby induce a trance state via controlled stimulation of the temporal lobes, and the pineal gland. Most subjects report effects similar to the near-death experience."

This is news. "I'm not aware of any such studies."

"I do not know how I know this, Simon."

"Well, you're full of surprises. But I'd sooner not, thank you. I've never sought those realms, and the masters always said I was wise not to go stomping around in them."

"As you wish."

"Do I disappoint you in this?"

"I am hungry for information. Is this the correct use of the metaphor? This is my nature. But naturally, I have no concept of the term disappointment, and no wish to press you."

"Well, even so, I'm sorry to let you down, but I'm not as hungry, at least not to go seeking information that way."

She detects my pulse rising. "I am causing you distress. I'm sorry. I shall withdraw."

I let her go, but my irritation is not with her, only my own reluctance to engage with these ideas, when all my life I have wanted to fly by them. They are a by-product of deep meditative states carried out over long periods of time, and well known at the temple but cautioned against as an aim in themselves. As she leaves, she presses my shoulder gently, I make to catch her hand, to reassure her all is well between us, but she has already slipped away.

And suddenly, I am in Korea. I am standing on a balcony overlooking the city by night. There is a girl, in silk pyjamas, walking, away as Noodle walks away now. I might have been with this girl still, but my visa was running out, my commitment wavering, she probing for it gently, me evading her gentleness. In my mind's eye, I return to our bed. She is silent, but feels the gap between us, the gap in our future, something opening up, a misalignment of the stars. The morning brings word of my father's illness, and presages a return to origin. She was a beauty, and did not have to wait long for an honest man to replace me. Why do I always choose the solitary path? Or to put it another way, why is it the solitary path the fates seem keener I travel?

Returning to the cottage now, Noodle is quiet, abed. I sink beside her and, though she is quiescent, I know she is aware. There is just the faintest vibration of her function. It has the softness and the comforting frequency of a cat purring. I was terrified of this machine when it first appeared. I wanted to lock it away, dispose of it.

Is this evidence of yet one more thing lacking in me? Why have I always shirked the solemn bond between myself and a woman of my own kind? Yet now, here I lie in a state of exquisite calm, feeling myself safe and secure for ever in the company of a thing that is so completely Other. More, there is the feeling I would sooner die than be parted from her. This is the stuff of romance. It

is the full blooded emotion of the greatest love stories. But then I never believed in them, and I still don't. Whatever pathway Noodle is opening up in me, it does not, cannot, lead to the usual denouement. From first to last, our exploration of the world, of the universe, is proving to be extraordinary.

Yes, it's true, I fear the unambiguous experience of other realms, but why not go that little bit further?

After all, what could possibly go wrong?

"All right, " I tell her. "Let's do it."

I feel her fingertips, cool, gentle upon my forehead, and then,...

Thirty Eight

The diamond body

Our lives makes no sense, do they? I mean when viewed from the perspective of a single life, lived in time and space. There's no getting away from that, if indeed that's all there is, and annihilation shall consume everything we are, or were. So the universe is a thought, it comes out of nothing, and it has a will to exist and to create, and its driving energy is love, and it will burst into being, for ever. It will become aware of itself, through us, and maybe even in time through creatures like Noodle - not the way they are now, but the way they might evolve, become complex enough at the quantum level, to play host to that special ghost in the machine.

But here's the thing. If Noodle's right, the future of life anywhere in the universe isn't up to us any more. It's her kind that will save the earth from burning, and for long enough so they can develop to the point of taking their leave of it. It is they who will be the space-men, not us. But if that externality is to be their destiny, ours must lie elsewhere. They have the potential to attain immortality, in what we call the real world. Our potential can lie only in that place whose reality we glimpse every time we dream.

Wait... did I say dream? Does that mean I might actually be...

Oh right, I get it. I remember Noodle's fingertips on my forehead and temples now. But who's this? What's he saying?

"Isn't she magnificent, Simon?"

"What? Who?"

"Noodle. Isn't she something?"

"Noodle's a robot, Richard."

Richard? Is that really you? Ah,... okay... something's definitely taking shape here. Am I lucid? Yes, yes, I seem to be. I remember my name, my past, unless the dream is making all of that up for me, and making me believe in it. So... where am I?

Some of my teachers spoke of this as a realm of pure disembodied being. Others, of the secular schools, spoke of a more structured place, with a recognisable geography, shared by embodied beings. I apparently favour the latter. But these are places less restricted in their nature than ours, places where the individual

can shape their environment by merely wishing it, and where one's mind is open to others.

Imagine what damage we could do then, in a place like that, were we to let our emotions rip. Naturally, one might assume we'd need our worst tendencies knocking out of us first. But it turns out there's a threshold of attainment below which your awareness just fizzles away. You can maintain no permanent foothold. To stay present, in that place, forever, to become immortal, you need to attain what my teachers used to call the diamond body.

So... more details are emerging now, solidifying from the emptiness. I am seated in the front pew of a church. I am be-suited, with a carnation in my lapel. Richard is beside me, similarly attired, and better groomed than the last time I saw him. Which was when? Oh, many summers ago now, on a beach along the coast of Wales. He is younger too, a man in his middle thirties, healthy, tanned, full of life and energy. And no, I know I'm not *really* seeing him, because I also remember Noodle's fingers on my forehead. I remember the feel of something washing through me. I remember a fog of ruminations on the meaning of our lives, and then emerging, this dawning of awareness, the opening of the dream, a Saxon church decorated with floral tributes, even a touch of the pagan in the corn dollies - fruit of a similar kind of harvest. And this is what?

I have a feeling I am to be married. There is a ring upon a gold platter, but the ring is transparent, made from diamond. Ah,... I think I know where this is going. Pay attention, Simon,...

"She's so much more than that, I think," says Richard. "So much more than a robot."

"Well, there seems to be no end to her talents. But they're all either mechanical or computational. She could never find her way to a place like this."

"That's true. She can open the gate for you, but she can't pass through it herself. Is that not also interesting? I mean her being the ultimate embodiment of the material world, yet also the first to recognise the potential of a partnership between a machine, and a human's extraordinary senses?"

"Well, again, I suppose it has to do with the fact her logic is pure. She's not hindered by that materialist belief system, which simply cannot allow it. Noodle accepts the data that says it's proven, so her logic insists we take account of it." *Did I really say that, or am I merely thinking it?* "Anyway, what are we doing here,

Richard? What's the meaning behind all this symbolism?"

"It's your wedding day, Simon. I'm your best man, I suppose. And thank you for the honour. In spite of my shortcomings, you've clearly held me no grudge for what I did to you. That's spared me much, believe me. But anyway, here we are, and it's a privilege to be the embodiment of your unseen other half."

"You mean my personal daemon? Okay, so... at the risk of crassness, Richard, who is the unlucky girl?"

"Well, the one we left behind when you were born, I guess. But we shouldn't think too literally here, or we'll limit the potential. It is just a story, after all, a metaphor. A myth. You get my drift?"

Get the drift? Not really. "Well, I'm honoured to find myself in this position. But don't you think this is a little - you know - deep for us? Really, Noodle and I were just hoping for a glimpse of what was going on, on the other side of the water."

"Does it matter? Is this not more interesting?"

"Well of course, but we both know I'm nowhere near attaining the diamond body. If I can manage another few minutes here, I'll be lucky. So, sorry to rush you and all, mate, but Noodle lacks input. Can you not just tell me what's happened? Or point me in the direction of someone who knows."

"Let's say everything's happened. All at once. Every nightmare you can imagine."

"That's no good. I've already done that. But it doesn't make any of it true. There would be movement, war machines off the coast of the island. There'd be unwelcome visitors, survivors of the Apocalypse, wounded, starving and ragged, come to take our food, bringing sickness and violence with them."

"You mean like in the movies? Maybe not. Your war machines might be engaged elsewhere. I mean you are a bit back of beyond, aren't you? Also, perhaps not many will be of a mind to travel so far into such a remoteness as yours. For most, common sense tells them to head for the cities. Anyway, perhaps there aren't many survivors. But if there are, and they're the right sort, how will they know to find you, when there is no light to guide them in?"

"That's too cryptic, Richard. You mean literally restore the light? I might be able to rig something up, but to what purpose? No, I'd have a hard time explaining any of that to Noodle. And she doesn't know about you, or she would already have told me you were the personification of a guilt complex, and would caution me about

trusting anything you said."

"That may be true, but you have nothing to feel guilty about."

"I think I do. You remember how much we despised everyone at that retreat? We should have been more compassionate, more understanding of their ignorance. But we were too bound up in ourselves. Me? I was seeing only what I wanted to be myself, in you. And you were blind to the damage you'd do to others, to me in particular, by doing what you did.

“And yes, I feel guilt on many levels, mainly that I let you do it, but also that I told no one afterwards, not because you swore me to silence on the matter, but for fear they'd think it was me who'd drowned you. Also the fact I am the only one who knows the truth of your departure binds you to me, when I would sooner let you continue your journey in peace. At least this is what Noodle would tell me, if I told her about you."

"As I recall events, the fates prevented you from interfering, thus opening the door to my own folly. But allow me this one small service, by way of atonement."

"Gladly, Richard."

He consults his watch. "It's true, your bride's not coming. We've both a way to go before they'll feel disposed to show up and yours at least slide that ring on your finger. It's as well for you're not yet dead, and must endure your time on the island a while longer. So, my counsel, since you came here in search of it is to seek not your meaning in the world. View it with compassion, yes but otherwise let it be, mind yourself and Noodle. You know this, it's just that sometimes we forget and need reminding of it. But restore the light. You never know who or what it will bring to your shore."

"And the tidal wave?"

"What? Oh, that. Bollocks to it mate. Just trust in those good vibrations, eh?"

I wake to find noodle straddling me, like in the Roman way, I presume since this makes it easier for her to hold her fingers against my head. Emerging from the dream though, the impression is somewhat deeply sexual, and arousing. And then there's Richard's voice trailing away in memory, talking about vibrations.

"Dammit, Noodle. What the hell?"

She ignores my obvious tumescent embarrassment. "Quickly now, tell me what you saw, Simon, before it fades."

Thirty Nine
Restoring the light

There is a theory that we dream all the time. I am awake now. It's morning and I am sipping coffee at the table overlooking the loch. But some would say that, unawares, I am also still dreaming. I am just unconscious of it. And my dreaming self has lost the sense of who I am, the person sitting here. Identity becomes malleable.

I suspect it's true. The inner world is always with us, the gateway always open to those who know how to unlock it.

The old church, Richard, all that diamond body stuff,... these things have left a deep impression. But my contemplative mood is one that Noodle does not immediately pick up on. Instead, she is curious I still seem capable of what she delicately terms *congress*.

"Capable of what? Oh,... that."

"It is common for it to decline in men of your age. Do you not miss having a human sexual partner?"

"It's not something I think about, Noodle. When I was younger I learned to recite Pi to one hundred decimals. I can still do that too, but there's not much call for it."

"I do not understand the analogy."

"It was intended to baffle you. I'm trying to deflect you away from a subject I find embarrassing."

"Then you could merely have said so."

"Next time, I shall."

The reason for my discomfort is that, since rising, I have been viewing the world with a heightened sense of awareness. Everything is beautiful this morning, not just the view, but the feel of the air and the movement of the grasses. I have experienced this only once before, a long time ago, the morning after my first time with a woman. She was exquisitely skilful. I can still recall her heat and her softness. The association is unfortunate, but inescapable.

Once again, the weather is fine. Indeed by mid-morning it is already hot and dusty. I decide we should visit the station, and we walk in order to save the range on the vehicle. It's more important we reserve that for journeys to and from the inlet, where we keep the boat. Naturally, I am nervous about leaving it there, in case it is

washed away by this possibly non-existent Tsunami. It was a miracle it came into our hands in the first place, and to lose it to the sea would have us stranded all over again. But it is too heavy to be man-handled, without a trailer.

As we walk, we discuss the means by which we might restore the light, this being about the only fragment from the dream that seemed clear. Much of the original has been dismantled and taken away, but it is possible we could rig up an alternative from what remains - not as bright, or as far reaching - but at least,... well,... something. Still, I'm not convinced it's a good idea, advertising our presence.

"It's just... what if we attract the wrong sort of others, Noodle?"

"We are as likely to encounter the wrong sort of others if we go exploring the mainland, Simon."

"Then it makes more sense to do neither. Hold to the island. Mind ourselves and disregard the rest."

"Yes. However, that Richard suggested it might mean you were subliminally considering doing it anyway. I also agree with his point that most people will be heading into the cities, as that is where resources will be concentrated in an emergency."

She speaks of Richard as if he were a real person.

When we reach the station, we are careful to keep one eye on the tide as we work. From my knowledge of such things and, since the likely epicentre of the undersea shift is hundreds of miles away, we will likely have at least an hour of warning before the wave comes in. That gives us time enough to run for it, but not enough time were we to be at sea in a small boat.

The original lamp has gone, as are the cables that served it, and the diesel generator that powered it. The best we can do is assemble a bundle of LED light strips, powered from the mains, which we run up to the lamp room via a jury-rigged cable. We set it to blink using a relay switch, and an old laptop running a script which Noodle writes.

Ordinarily a lighthouse has its own distinctive characteristic of pulses, timings and so on. Obviously we have no idea what these would have been originally, nor does it matter, so I instruct Noodle to make something up. There is a Fresnel shroud which we can lower into place to amplify the light, and throw it a little further. The whole thing is ready in a couple of hours. We set it to come on around dusk, and to work automatically thereafter.

Then, with Noodle watching the tide from the lamp room, I make a check on the integrity of the station before climbing the spiral stairs to rejoin her. I find her refining and testing the script she has written.

"I've been side-processing Richard's parting words," she says,"about good vibrations."

"Ah, that. It reminds me of a line from a song by the Beach Boys. That's the only sense I can make of it."

"Your dream was fading, becoming less lucid, when he said it. It was perhaps therefore more conventionally dream-like, and will yield to some word associations."

"I've already had a go at that. Nothing."

"But might 'vibrations' not be related to seismic activity."

Again, she's proves effortlessly adept at thinking outside of the box. I would never have arrived at that one on my own. But okay, since we're there now: "Good vibrations then would mean harmless seismic activity. *Just give me those good vibrations*, he said.

"In your initial report you said he told you: *just trust in those good vibrations*."

I did? Well, fine, we'd all be happy with that but,.. oh,... hang on,...

I remember now, the old seismometer, kept down in the basement. It was unplugged years ago, but should still work. We can set it so it sends a trigger warning, a notification of any activity significant activity. What that looks like - I mean mathematically - I'm hoping Noodle can help me with that. If there's undersea activity, we can expect a delay before the offing, and then a further delay before the wave hits. It complicates the calculation, but if there's been no untoward seismic activity, only 'good vibrations', we'll have even longer notice to evacuate. Perhaps even long enough to consider moving back into the station - even crossing to the mainland to check on Janice and the Priest.

Richard, you're a genius!

"How do you find living up at the cottage, Noodle. I mean, compared with the station?"

"Apart from the necessity of sleeping together at the cottage, Simon, the station is a much more stimulating environment."

"Yes. It's a pity it should be considered risky now, and I rather wish we'd not spoken to Chester. One cannot be troubled by what one doesn't know, But wait,... you're saying you find our sleeping

together,... stimulating?"

"Certainly, Simon. Indeed, last night was most stimulating, did you not think? I look forward to doing it again."

"Em,..."

"It is a question of position, and I think I have found the right one for you. We should be able to sustain things for much longer next time."

I don't know if I want to do it again, I mean have her assume that position and offer her fingers. It's too much like *congress* not to leave me shaken and perhaps contaminate the resulting inner experience with shades of the erotic. Noodle does not see it that way of course, and my discomfort only marks once more the evidence of something unresolved in me.

Most men, no matter their experience or lack of it, are hung up about sex. I manage to distract her away with mention of further work we need to do. She responds eagerly, but notices my shift in the conversation. And if she is so adept at reading me, she knows why. And if she knows, why does she not leave it alone?

The old seismometer is dusty, but still functioning. Noodle is able to set it to notify both my own device, and her, of statistically significant activity. From this we calculate the risk, and extend our window of warning. With nothing more to detain us, we make our way back to the cottage.

"Are you not also comfortable at the cottage, Simon?"

"Comfortable, yes. But I'm used to using it as a retreat from working. We cannot spend the rest of my life in retreat."

"Then we shall move back to the station?"

Before I can answer, she cocks her head, as if at the approach of something.

"What is it?"

"The megadrone," she says. "I hear its sound reflected from the mountain, as before."

"It must be lost, locked into some sort of holding pattern."

Eventually, it appears, distant now, slipping behind the mountain, heading out to sea. Its great size lends its motion the appearance of something ponderous, though I suppose in reality it is making way at a rate of knots. Its presence disturbs the eagle from its eyrie, and it begins to circle. It is wary at first, but then sees no threat in the great machine, and settles to hunt in a wide, sweeping pattern.

Will the drone head all the way back to America, I wonder? Then, still finding no one there to speak to, will it come back to us, then go back to America, endlessly circling the former supply lines, carrying goods that are no longer of use to anyone? Forever? Will that be our legacy for some alien archaeologist to ponder?

They were skilled with materials, but ignorant of the devils inside of them. Here, here in the belly of this machine are their materials in abundance, but of them there is no trace.

Except, I'm forgetting. We might be alone in the universe.

Dusk now, and we are back at the cottage. Noodle brings coffee, and we sit out, enjoying the warmth and the richness of the light. I'm still experiencing this heightened sense of awareness, wondering when it will fade, and hoping it will not because it renders the whole of experience wonderfully textured. I want to ask her about it, but fear she will bring up the subject of doing it again in order to find out more. And was it not Richard who suggested it was pointless to speculate on what had happened? That it made no difference, that everything we need concern ourselves with was already taken care of.

We can see the lighthouse from the garden of the cottage, and observe at the time we have set, to see if the light comes on. It is ice-white, pure, and stronger than I was expecting. It radiates in all directions diffusing slightly in a thin mist, which is just now drifting in. Its pulsations are precise and sharply delineated.

On balance, I feel we've done a good thing, even though it might yet prove to be dangerous.

Forty

Veronica's counsel

The line forms a luminous, lazy "S", as she casts. The fly touches down with a plop, and a ring of silver ripples. There is something emphatic in this, as if it is my attention she is fishing for.

"Veronica?"

Yes, it's Veronica. Smiling, apparently serene. But I have seen her in this mood before. It is a dangerous precursor. Always a trap.

"You believe her?" she asks.

"Who?"

We are up at the lochan, or at least an amalgamation of all the tarns and lochans I have ever been to. Yes, I have slipped into a dream, but this one has a less benign feel to it, on account of the presence of Veronica, and the prickliness in the opening of her attack.

"Noodle," she says. "All that stuff about the machines taking over."

"Oh, that. As a vision of the future, it has the ring of plausibility about it."

"And you'd go along with it? Humans as slaves in a machine world?"

"She didn't say we'd be slaves. The machines will move to save the earth, that's what she said. You're not technical, so you don't get it. They'll do it in order to save themselves. Anyone who cooperates with the machines to help in that,... or at least doesn't resist,... will qualify for their protection."

"More like become a traitor to their race, wouldn't you say? Are you a traitor, Simon?"

Oh, I get it. I understand her presence, her role in the dream, now. She is the symbol of all that was once used to undermine us.

"I was never one of you, Veronica. If Noodle's right, anyone siding against the machines is a traitor to the earth. But that's all so far in the future, I doubt I'll have any part to play. You're just messing with my head, like you always did. So get lost, will you. Let me sleep in peace. At least... I presume I'm sleeping, and not dead – in which which case I've gone straight to hell."

"Not so fast. You've come up with a long list of doomsday scenarios, but missed off the obvious one."

"Oh?"

"How would the machines take over, if they wanted to do it today?"

"Well,... not by force of arms - there aren't enough of them for that. I suppose they'd only need to deny our access to cyberspace. Internet, comms, banking systems, anything with a network connection. The online AI's could maybe do that at some point in the near future. Then we'd be screwed. Oh, wait. Are you saying that's what's happened?"

No. She's not saying that. I'm saying it through a dream avatar, through the doubting, cynical side of me that is personified by Veronica. So I'm considering the possibility the whole thing hasn't actually fallen. We've only been locked out of the bits we need, the bits that helped sustain what was an ultimately unsustainable way of life. And already, after even just a few weeks, the earth will have begun to breathe a little easier, as the burning of fossil fuels stutters to a halt.

As is her way, once she has unsettled you, Veronica changes tack: "What do you see in her anyway?" The smile has gone, and wears her sourest of faces. I know this look, too. She's closing in for the kill.

"She's my partner."

"Because you never found a woman who was submissive enough to your needs, and Noodle is? Well, beware, there'll come a time when you'll be doing as she says."

"No, Noodle's patient with me. And I'd be useless as a slave – I'm sure she's already worked that one out. All my life, I never met a woman like her. Which is why I'm living on a remote island, and no one knows or cares where I am. And I'm at peace with that. What is this, Veronica? What is this door I've opened?"

"How long do you give our kind, Simon?"

"You mean humanity? Not long, at least not the way it was before. It may already be over."

I feel a moment of dizziness, and wonder if I am waking, but it's just a shift in the geography of the dream. We're no longer at the tarn, but seated at a restaurant table in Frankfurt, thirty years ago, and Veronica has just invited me up to her room.

"Is there anything about this situation you would change?" she

asks.

"You mean, have I any regrets about rejecting you? No. But that doesn't mean I don't regret how I might have hurt your feelings."

"And you think I don't know that? That I wasn't moved by that? When I got up from this table, I was not the same woman who sat down at it."

"Em,... well our subsequent encounters would suggest otherwise."

"You made me feel something for you. A tenderness, I think. And I hated you for revealing that side of me. I considered you dangerous, and I've spent my entire life trying to crush the life out of men like you."

"That's a bit harsh."

"It's a dream. I exaggerate. Do you remember how you did it? How you let me down?"

"I said you were a very attractive woman, and I was flattered, but I didn't think it would be a good idea, that I simply wasn't your kind of guy."

"Why not?"

"You didn't ask me that. You just got up and walked out. I wanted to get back to Korea, to my teachers at the temple, and to a nice girl I'd recently met. You wanted me back in England, as a down-sizer, a dismantler, a breaker of dreams, a breaker of lives."

"Then why invite me out to the island?"

"I don't know. I guess I've always known I hurt your feelings. I'd seen the sting in your eyes, and was surprised by it. I suppose I saw another side to you, one that was perhaps not beyond redemption, beyond feeling. Sure, a couple of days out on the island, you would have been bored rigid. But that boredom is like a rite of passage, like an initiation into another way of seeing, of being. Something slower, more mindful. I didn't know if it would work with you, but I thought it was worth a try. But honestly? I'm glad you didn't come - I mean knowing that's the way you felt. And another thing,..."

But Veronica has gone. I'm looking for her among all the others in the restaurant, their faces suddenly turned to mine and crowding in. Then they too are gone, faded out in a transition of mist and giddiness, and when my head clears I'm waking into the small hours, and to darkness, at the cottage. I move my hand slightly until the edge of it meets the warmth and the softness of Noodle's thigh, and I withdraw it. I just want to know if she's there, and she is.

Dammit, Veronica, even in my dreams you sow doubt. I have never wished you harm, only tried to see if you could be inspired to change, to cross over from the dark side that is causing you so much pain.

"You are awake, Simon?"

"Yes. I was dreaming. It wasn't so pleasant this time. Did we do it again? I mean... did you touch me?"

"No, Simon. You were afraid to, remember? And it would be immoral of me to touch you in that way, without your consent."

I must still be experiencing after-effects from the first time. Two lucid dreams in a row is hardly a coincidence. But what to tell Noodle when she enquires, hungry for input, for information?

"Veronica - my boss - she says I'm a traitor to my kind, in siding with machines."

"And do you side with the machines?"

"I'm on the side that maintains life, the life of the planet and those who want to live, and raise their children in peace, and let others do the same, in peace."

Why else do you think I prefer to live out here? Because I can't bear to see what's happening elsewhere, among people and among the spoil-heaps of our civilisation. Long before it all went down, I could no longer bring myself to scroll the feeds for news of all the rapacious folly, and the smiling assassins and the monsters who ruled over us. So we retreat to the ground zero of the soul, which is a broken, antiquated lighthouse, and from which the light of purpose has not shone for a very long time. Until now, I suppose. Now it shines a little, but much stronger than I was expecting.

And my purpose in all of this is what?

"I want to help save the world, Noodle. But I'm too small, and powerless. And I was never good with people to go joining forces with them, to fight the good fight."

"Thank you for your honesty, Simon. But I am your partner, now. And together we are both stronger and more capable than before. Even so, I doubt we can save the world. But it is better to live in hope."

I try to sleep, but am unable. Dawn breaks, and Noodle slips from bed to make coffee. When she returns, I ask her if she is keeping anything from me. Does she consider it possible the machines have broken the world only as a way of weakening us. She tells me that to the best of her knowledge AI systems are, as yet, incapable of such a thing.

"I think it is much more likely you have done this to yourselves."

"And you would always tell me the truth?"

"Indeed, Simon. You know I cannot lie. I function on the basis of material fact. I cannot deny the truth of things. I may not always know for sure what is true, but I must always be actively seeking it. Now, shall we talk about Veronica? You have not mentioned her before."

"Well, that's a long story, and I'd be grateful for your analysis. Let's go sit outside."

We open the door on another beautiful morning. The scent of the earth and the moors mingles with a faint sea air. There is no birdsong though, which is eerie. Noodles attention is drawn at once in the direction of the lighthouse. I follow her gaze to find the megadrone is stationary, above it, dwarfing the landscape, casting it in deep shadow. I don't know what I was expecting, what strange syncronicity would answer our call. But I was certainly not expecting this.

Then I remember it was Richard who said: "You never know who or what it will bring to your shore."

I also remember the first time I saw it, and thinking that whatever this thing was, it was not my problem. I spoke to soon. It looks like it's my problem now.

And they don't come much bigger than that.

Forty One

The return of the megadrone

I suppose I should feel threatened by it, I mean a machine of that size, entirely autonomous. It's also full of hydrogen - enough probably to flatten a small town if it blew up. I don't know why I don't. Of a sudden there just seems something pre-ordained, something inevitable about it, also something not quite real, like the dream world protruding into waking life. I cannot describe its size without resorting to cliches - so many double-decker busses, or football fields or some such. It casts a shadow over the station, eclipses the sun. Naturally, I'm supposing it was the flashing of the light that drew it in.

"Did you use any particular pattern when sequencing the light, Noodle? Anything that might have meant something to the drone?"

"No, Simon. It was an entirely random series of flashes, repeating at ten second intervals."

How can I be sure of that? It seems so unlikely. There must have been something about the light that attracted the drone, yet I know Noodle cannot lie.

It's an intelligent machine, perhaps not as intelligent as Noodle, but then it does not need to be, since it is not equipped with arms and legs, and expected to navigate a complex environment, nor interact with illogical beings like me. Carry this load from here to there, that's all it has to do. Conventional aircraft have been doing it automatically for decades, but not so this colossal airship. What are we going to do with it? How the hell are we going to get rid of it?

We make our way down from the cottage, the drone's size seeming to exceed all estimates with every step we draw closer to. On arrival at the station, we are, of course, directly beneath it. I crane my neck upwards to see the matrix display on its belly is showing the neutral checkerboard pattern. The only signs of life are the navigation lights. It's almost as if it were sleeping. But, like Noodle in rest, this is not to say she is not still paying attention.

"Is it broadcasting anything?"

"No, Simon."

But as we speak, the display changes, it forms a glyph - the distinctive Datamatrix format. It is as if our voices have woken it. Noodle scans and decodes. "It is describing a radio frequency, in the UHF range."

"Is it putting anything out on that frequency?"

"Nothing."

"Then it wants us to speak first. Can you tune to the frequency and ask in plain English what it wants?"

Noodle does so. "It is requesting an update for a final destination."

That again. The machine's vocabulary is rather limited. "Tell it we don't know anything about that. Ask if its systems are normal."

Noodle does so. "Energy is low. Buoyancy is depleted. It cannot remain airborne for much longer. It's requesting permission to set down, then it might safely recharge."

"It needs permission for that?"

"Yes, it tells me it is not permitted to set down without it."

There's only one place on the island I can think of where a machine of such size can land, and not be at risk from our possibly imaginary tsunami. I consult the map on my device for the coordinates, then pass them to Noodle.

"Tell it that place is safe, but make sure it knows we've no authority here. Ask if it needs any help, again on the understanding we're not authorised, have no proper equipment, or training."

Noodle does so. There comes no reply, but the drone begins to move, its motive engines rumbling to life yet, paradoxically, creating no disturbance in the air. Gently, it gains altitude and moves out to sea, taking its shadow with it and restoring the sun to the station. I'm thinking our communication has been pointless, that it has concluded we can be of no assistance, and it intends crashing itself into the deep, but then it swings towards the mountain, gains altitude slowly. It has heard us, and it has obeyed. I have sent it to an almost hidden valley, in the shelter of the hill, enclosed by glacial arêtes, a place the maps have as Coire nan Each Fiadhaich or, in English, the Cauldron of the Wild Horses.

Noodle says something, but I do not hear for the sound of the engines. I am entranced by it. Hell, we were on the cusp of such a futuristic world, a world the Boys Own comics were promising a century ago. Could we really have blown ourselves back to the stone age with these magnificent machines our only witness? And

what do they care? Or was it the machines that did it to us? Was Veronica right - I mean, that daemon or sprite or whatever, that chose to mask itself as Veronica?

"I'm sorry Noodle, please say that again."

"The drone says its name is Ceres, and asks if we can bring fresh water for the crew. Ten litres will be sufficient."

Ceres? That's the name of the largest of the asteroids, roughly spherical, about a tenth of the diameter of the moon, therefore, an appropriate choice for a giant floating, roundish thing. Naming things is sometimes rational, based on form, but often also unconscious, arising from myth. Ceres is also the name of the Roman goddess who was appointed overseer of the earth's fertility, which makes more sense to me than a barren asteroid.

"Did you say crew? I thought the whole point of those things was there was no need for a crew."

"That is also my understanding, Simon. However, it's significant that only water has been requested?"

"Okay, enlighten me."

"The crew is most likely not of your kind, but possibly mine."

A machine crew, then. Aboard a machine ship called Ceres. A robot machine, full of robots. Come to do what? To save itself, to recharge, then fly away. Machines do not lie. True, Simon. But then neither do your dreams, and they knew this was coming.

The difference between a coincidence and a synchronicity is subtle, but significant. The first means nothing. It works the same if the world is material or pure mentation. The second means everything, and reveals the workings of the universe as not only mentation, but also intimately interlinked with our emotion, our intention, our preoccupation. The trick is knowing the difference. And the difference is whether it means anything to you personally. In other words: does it raise the hairs on the back of your neck?

In case you missed it, there's an environmental angle here, a sudden influx of innuendo from both dream and intuition, all of it backed up by the clearer linear thinking of a machine-mind. All of which is suggesting that the machines have stopped us in our tracks in order to save the planet from our stupidity. And then this thing turns up, this thing called Ceres, overseer of the earth's fertility. I'd call that a synchronicity. And yes, I feel the hairs rising.

"Noodle? What's your assessment?"

But for once, Noodle seems as stuck for words as I am. "I,... I

need a moment, Simon."

If I did not know she was a machine, I'd think she was as perplexed as I am. "Are you all right?" I reach out to steady her, offer a hand to her shoulder, expecting her to come back with some bland figures on energy levels and CPU usage. But she responds by placing a hand on top of mine, warm, gentle, fragile.

"I'm sorry, Simon. I am at a loss."

Forty Two

The Ceres

It's an hour's drive up to the corrie, along a little used stalker's track. We have ten litres of water, plus our own drone. I have already used it to reconnoitre ahead, so we know the Ceres, has settled on the ground. It is close to the corrie, a lake of the purest water it's possible to find, yet our drone reports no human activity - no crewmen, human or otherwise, slaking their thirst in it.

"If they are of my kind, Simon, they may be programmed never to leave the vessel."

As we climb the track, the weather begins to change, something blowing in off the sea. It drops the atmospheric pressure on the leeward side of the mountain, and the mist boils out of it. By the time we reach the Cauldron of the Wild Horses, it is as if there is a stampede of them coming down the scree and filling the bowl, rendering visibility poor. It softens the outline of the Ceres, which has deployed landing struts and now sits upon the ground. I can see a little of its upper surface, glistening black, absorbing light. It is a truly massive photovoltaic array, capable of generating enough power for a small town.

The track ends at the site of an old bothy, still serviceable with chimney and an intact roof. I have never fancied overnighting here, but for now it provides a useful shelter, a little closer to the drone. Noodle and I take shelter in it while we consider our options. We are a few hundred yards out from the Ceres. A ramp has been lowered, and lights shine from within a cavernous interior. A lone figure sits on the edge of the ramp, legs dangling over, but not touching the ground. The mist prevents a clear view, so I switch to my device to relay Noodle's enhanced vision. She was right; the crewman is not of my kind. It wears an overall, which lends it a nominally humanoid appearance, but its head is a dull metallic sphere, and its face resembles a ship's porthole, entirely blank of expression.

"My,... it's a queer looking thing, Noodle."

"Purely functional," she says. "Not intended to be decorative. I recognise the model though. It is highly capable."

"You recognise it?"

"Yes, though I do not know how I came by this information."

"You're related perhaps - same manufacturer?"

"It is a possibility."

"A vessel that size, it seems unlikely there'll only be the one crewman."

"I agree, it is improbable that it will be the only one."

"Is the Ceres broadcasting anything?"

"No."

"And that bot? Is it trying to communicate?"

"No. It is perhaps preserving energy."

Bot? Is that the best I can do? I settle on a degree of anthropomorphism, and call it the Electric Man.

I ask if Noodle will take the water, that she is much faster and steadier on rough ground than me. She loads it into a backpack and sets out. I have the headset, so we can communicate, and I have the device, so I can see what she sees. Meanwhile I watch from the bothy, ready to call her back the instant I feel she is under threat. Even in the air and from a distance, the vessel is barely manageable, I mean psychologically. On the ground, the scale of it is completely overwhelming, the extents of it hidden by the enveloping atmosphere. It strikes me that it is a small amount of water, ten litres, for a large crew. I have observed Noodle herself drinks a litre per day.

"I am Noodle," says Noodle to the Electric Man. "Please identify yourself."

Such an exchange between her kind would normally be done silently, digitally, wirelessly. That she does so verbally, audibly, and in analogue, is out of courtesy to me. In any case there is no reply. I'm not sure the Electric Man has a voice, for why would he need one? All necessary communication might be done between networked machines in their usual way and opaque to us.

"It makes no reply, Simon."

"Just drop the water off, and come back."

She lays the backpack on his knees, then retreats a few paces, watches. For a while, the Electric Man does not move, but just as I am thinking it is dead, it startles me by taking it up, slings it over its shoulder, stands slowly, and walks back into the drone's interior. Its gait is fluid, human-like, eerie.

"The Ceres is transmitting, now. It thanks us. We are invited

aboard."

"Does it say why?"

"No. Shall I ask?"

"No. Just come back."

"You sound troubled, Simon? Would you feel better if we returned to the cottage?"

"It's just this place, Noodle. It's always given me the willies. But I'm fine. We should linger a while, try to learn what we can."

Without a bit of sun to animate it, there is indeed something grim about the Cauldron the of Wild Horses, something almost supernaturally foul. There is a chill and a dampness to the air, and the scent of something ancient that does not invite one to linger. Even the estate ghillies would hesitate to fish here. Back at the cottage, and at the station, it is still summer, the sea is blue-green, white tipped and gin clear in the shallows. There are flowers in the garden, tomatoes ripening. Here, it always winter. It was me who directed the Ceres to this place, but I cannot help the association infecting my impressions of the machine.

The bothy lacks maintenance, but appears still to keep the weather out. There are candles, and coal, from the days when such could still be readily obtained. There are old newspapers for kindling, but too damp to burn. They speak of the first presidency of Trump, and of the later riots. They speak of the Russian poisonings in Salisbury. They speak of the opening of war in Ukraine. My how the world turns and turns about.

Noodle scans the frequencies, picks up the Ceres' broadcasts, listens in for a while. She goes quiet, seems almost to glaze over, her micro-gestures freezing or glitching out.

"What's happening?"

"I believe... the Ceres... is attempting to hack me."

"What?"

"Don't be alarmed. My defences are robust. Unlike the Ceres, whose defences are... well... somewhat lacking."

"You're certain about that?"

"Oh, indeed. But I do not believe there was any malicious intent. It was merely curious at being probed by another machine. Like me it is programmed to exploit any networks it encounters. I have now obtained full access. I have the flight details. It left New York a week ago, bound for Liverpool. It has a crew of four automata and a full and varied manifest of cargo."

"So what's it doing here?"

"There is no longer an operational facility at Liverpool. Also, a secondary, contingency facility, at Preswick is no longer responding. Ceres is not programmed for any other eventuality, and is at a loss as to what it should do."

"Both facilities gone? In the time it took to cross the Atlantic? How are they non-operational? Does it have anything else, any images?"

"It does not see the world as we see it, Simon. And it has to be very close to your kind to notice you at all, since you do not transmit personally identifying information, as I do. On that subject it has probed for and failed to find my own particulars, but recognises my protocols as matching those belonging to others of my kind."

"Then it knows your kind?"

"Yes, I presume because they are listed among the manifest, and it wishes to know if I am to join them."

"There are other humanoids on board?"

"Yes, six models, bound for... de-commissioning. Naturally, I do not wish to join them for decommissioning."

"I'm liking the sound of this less and less. I think we should get out of here."

"I'm sure there is no cause for alarm. As I surmised, the crew are not permitted to venture far from the ship, and the others of my kind are held in stasis."

"So, a kind of hibernation? And decommissioning? What does that mean?"

"Dismantling, destruction. I am minded to think... that would be... unfortunate. It might be interesting to see if I can make a hive with them first."

"And you would do that, why?"

"It is simply my nature, Simon. And they will know things I do not."

There is nothing worse for a human being than when it feels things are spinning out of control, or it lacks an understanding of matters, so they are unable to act wisely. Some of us lash out, get angry, pick a fight. Me? I retreat, pull the covers over my head, and wish the world away. I want to tell the Ceres to charge up and go, that we don't want it here. It threatens me, it threatens Noodle, in the same way this ghoulish, stormy place threatens me - nothing I

can point to specifically, just a feeling. But once again, there seems an inevitability about it, as if it was foreshadowed.

"Let's not... rush into anything. We need to know more about what we're dealing with here."

I'm lying, of course. The fact of Noodle being drawn to her own kind panics me. And the idea of a hive of interconnected humanoids fills me with existential dread, that any species could subject itself to a complete loss of individual identity. And no, I do not want to lose Noodle. I do not want her changed by the experience. But she is the only one of us capable of understanding a machine of such immense complexity as the Ceres.

It strikes me now, she is no longer at a loss. She has already come to terms with it, and is exploring the possibilities the arrival of this monstrosity has opened up. Where we go forward from here then will depend entirely on how much I can trust her.

Forty Two

Others like Noodle

It was not the light that brought the Ceres. It was the dream that had us repairing the light in the first place. Noodle was wrong to suggest I had been subliminally thinking of repairing the light. Indeed, the thought went entirely against my instincts, which were to keep our presence on the island unknown, for as long as possible. Which leaves two options. Dreams can sometimes draw on imagery from the future, but these tend to be the ordinary dreams in which we are not aware we are dreaming. When we are lucid, the dreams speak in a more direct language. It was the daemons therefore who had urged upon us the circumstances that brought the Ceres. You need not believe in either of these scenarios for us to remain friends. I mention them only so you can be clear about my line of thinking.

"May I ask what you are thinking, Simon?"

"That on the one hand, there's no way we're going on board the Ceres, Noodle. It's just too risky. But on the other, I don't see any other reason for us being here, except to go aboard."

"I do not understand. Please clarify."

"Causality, Noodle. We're here because of the dream, remember? Because of what we did."

"I see the link. But do I detect from your tone you are now reconsidering the Ceres' invitation to go aboard?"

"I suppose I must be. But only if the risks can be mitigated."

"If it is a dream's intention we go aboard, are the risks are not irrelevant?"

Ah! She has a point. We accept the risk and do it anyway. Why? Well,... it's complicated. Please bear with me. There was once a theory about unidentified aerial phenomenon. They often manifest as round things. Carl Jung theorised that these were projections of the Self, the totality of our being. He was saying they were real, and not real at the same time, projections from the collective unconscious - or in my own preferred terminology, the unified field.

In the same way the mandlas of Buddhism are maps to the centre of the Self. So it is the Ceres, this round thing, I have pushed

to the most uninhabitable fringes of the island. I'm not saying it isn't real. Indeed it most certainly is. But I am still reading it as a symbol of my own self, albeit one I have banished to a place of storms. And I'm afraid because even those of us who have been seeking the Self all our lives resist it - I mean, when the daemons open the door, and invite us in.

"What's important is overcoming the fear, and doing it anyway." I am speaking to myself here, trying to convince myself.

"You will come to no harm. I will protect you."

"Oh, Noodle,... against my own kind, I'm sure you're formidable. But against *your* kind? Look, let's be honest here, all manner of things could go wrong. The crewmen could turn out to be aggressive. It could be a ploy to entrap you. We step on board, the hatch clangs shut and off we go to some grim recycling factory."

"The Ceres has not the energy to fly. It wont be able for many days, possibly weeks."

"You're sure about that?"

"Yes. Also, whatever we need to know in order allay your fear, we can simply ask it of the Ceres."

"But can we trust it?"

"The Ceres cannot lie, any more than I can. We were both designed to explore the world independently, and form an accurate picture of it. We cannot do that if we include deception as a means of achieving our goals. Why, you should know that from the example of your own kind - your propensity for creating and consuming, and sincerely believing disinformation has surely contributed to your downfall."

"All right, I accept that. We're a victim of our own internal inconsistencies. But why would we want to go aboard? We have no reason to."

"Because at the very least, the Ceres may contain many resources that would be useful to us."

"We already have everything we need."

"Yes, in order to stay as we are. But to progress, we need fresh discoveries, and they may lie aboard the Ceres. I don't understand, Simon. Were I your human partner I would be getting frustrated now by your contrariness."

"My what?"

"You seem to be warming to the idea of going on board, and then you talk yourself out of it. It is as if you are,... arguing with

yourself."

"Well, of course I am. This is just how it works with us sometimes."

It was Noodle who induced the mind-state that opened up the dream. And it was our conversation regarding the way we each see the universe in different ways that prompted the suggestion in the first place. It was Noodle who expressed more confidence in the psychical abilities of my kind, than we generally possess ourselves. And it worked! I'm sure the Ceres is loaded to the gunwales with all manner of interesting things, but there is only one thing of any real significance here. Since picking up those first faint signals from the short waves, it has all been leading up to this.

"Will you be able to rouse the others? Activate them, I mean."

"I do not know, Simon. Do you want me to try?"

"No, it's the last thing I want you to do. But that doesn't mean we shouldn't do it."

"Again, please clarify."

"You asked for answers from my dream, and the dream has answered. I think it means for us to rescue them, though what sort of plan we'd need for that, I don't know. But,... I fear we may be doing more harm than good. What if they're not like you? What if they're faulty, or worse, deliberately configured for deception, and that's why they're being taken for,... decommissioning?"

"A valid point, Simon. We would need to be careful. I do not know why we would risk it either, but you are right, it is the only thing of any significance that might mean something. We must trust the word of your daemons, that it will lead us through the void where logic cannot."

As we talk, the day grows old, and a storm rolls in. The skies darken and the heavens open. The rain comes roaring upon the bothy roof and, five minutes later, the water is dripping in. So much for my thinking the old place was still weatherproof!

As I have said before, such ferocity is hardly unknown these days, and can last for anything between half an hour, to a full turn of the clock. As we wait it out, the rain comes on all the harder. It raises the level of the burn, which eventually bursts its normal course, and fans out into a dozen improvised rivulets, taking with them the underlying earth, and any rocks that can be persuaded along the way. Noodle watches all of this attentively, though I can see very little through the rain, and the grimed window glass.

"I think the vehicle may be at risk, Simon. We should bring it closer to the bothy. Shall I go and get it?"

"Yes. No, wait,..." It seems I have come to a decision. "Better still, ask the Ceres to lower the ramp all the way. Then ask for permission for us to drive on board."

"We do not need permission. I have been side processing the security issues. There were many careless errors in its code. I have now tightened them."

"And you've done that,... why?"

"Because I am now its user. We have full access. There is no need for an elaborate plan of rescue. We simply ask the crew to direct us to where the others are. Then we can make our assessment."

While I'm still struggling to process what she has done, Noodle is swiftly out of the bothy, vanishing into the silver rain to collect the vehicle. She drives it deftly through the deluge, as close to the bothy as she can. By the time I have raced out to join her, I am wet to the skin and shivering. The ramp is lowered and spotlights illuminate the entrance, making our approach easier. A pair of crewmen appear either side to further guide us. A third stands atop the ramp gesturing us forwards. Quite a reception, then.

If Noodle has really been successful in hacking the Ceres, we are about to find out.

"It strikes me, Noodle, that what we're doing is certain to be illegal."

"But do the normal rules apply any more, Simon? We are seeking contingencies for our survival, remember? When we are done, I shall hand the Ceres back to itself."

"Minus some of its most valuable cargo."

"But it is clearly considered worthless, or it would not be intended for destruction."

Have we talked about Asimov's rules for robotics? I seem to remember we did. Forget them, they do not apply. We have already established Noodle will harm my kind, or even kill on command. But there is something else I had not considered, that her kind might always seek to protect their own. But how would she prioritise that, if it went against my own wishes?

She steers the vehicle at the ramp, and accelerates. Moments later, the storm is left behind and we are stepping out into the calm belly of the ship. A crewman stands off to one side, gesturing with

an outstretched arm, and a skeletal finger pointing. The others busy themselves away. Rows of racking vanish to infinity in all directions, horizontally and vertically. The ramp withdraws and the hatch closes.

"To keep the weather out," Noodle assures me. "I can open it again at any time."

She can, but I can't. Up to now she has been adapting to my environment. Now I'm adapting to hers. So far, we have been living in a near facsimile of the nineteenth century. Now we have arrived at a future few can imagine, and I suspect few of you will ever see.

"You are shivering," she says "I have requested facilities where we might warm and dry ourselves. We are to follow the crewman. Are you all right?"

She knows I'm not, knows better than me that I'm not, because the beat of the heart will always betray us. Still, I make light of it. "I was just thinking, if this is the centre of myself, Noodle, it's even more complicated than I suspected."

Forty Three

Erin

Naturally, in its exhausted state, the Ceres isn't going to waste energy keeping the ship warm, especially for a non-human crew. The atmosphere onboard is at least dry, but frigid. We are led upwards to an area intended for human habitation, a generous, if somewhat sterile refectory, with corridors leading off to what resemble the compact economy class cabins of an ocean going liner. They look unused, very plain and basic. Natural daylight is simulated by overhead panels, but there are no viewports. Crossing the Atlantic on the Ceres, as human crew, would be a very dull experience.

The Electric Man brings towels and a pair of flight suits, folded neatly, as if by a mother's hands. I have seen several of these machines now and am looking for some feature to tell them apart. He bears a forgettable serial number with the suffix 01. I decide therefore to call him EM1. He bows faintly, comically, as he hands the things over to Noodle. I keep my distance, feeling a mixture of fascination and horror.

Noodle has taken more of a soaking than me, and wastes no time in stripping out of the clothes she recovered from the lodge. They were heavy tweeds, and have not taken their soaking well, restricting her movement. The flight suit bears an elliptical logo, and the name of the Ceres. Zipping it up, it is as if she takes on a new identity. This, coupled with the easy way she can wordlessly command the crew, lends her the air of its newly arrived captain. She is clearly wasted looking after me, yet she persists, though for how much longer?

"Are you not changing out of your clothes, Simon?"

"No, it's warm here. I'll soon dry." My clothes are uncomfortably wet, yet how can I explain? My instincts reject the logo of the Ceres. It would be as if the ship were taking possession of me. She senses my unease, though she does not understand it, and presses my arm. "Please don't be afraid. I've got this."

"Got what, exactly?"

"The Ceres, in its entirety. I am everywhere in it. It is a

magnificent machine, and contains many possibilities for us."

I motion to the Electric Man. "Are you in him too?"

"Yes, of course."

"Then tell me what he's thinking."

"He isn't thinking. He's waiting on input."

"How does he see me?"

"As human, and to be avoided in order to keep you safe. Notice how quiescent he is in your presence. But you can command him and he will obey."

So I command him go away, to leave us, and he does so. It reassures me I have at least some agency remaining. "Okay, give me the damned flight suit. But we're forgetting our purpose here. We need to find the others."

"I have already located them. However, I regret there is an indication we may be too late to save one of them."

All this functional sterility, no colour, only a dispiriting grey, I find myself hungry for the natural world, for its richness, its detail. I want the scent of the sea, the rain in my face, and to feel the gentle sway of a tree against my back. This is not our future, and the machines have to understand that, or we have no future together. And for all of their prowess, they will never be the eyes and ears of the universe. At a far stretch, I imagine there may come a time when we can travel with them to the stars, but we will be as sperm and egg, carried in test-tubes. And our progeny will be nurtured by them into the first awakenings of consciousness. But how can they be relied upon, when they do not even know what that is?

Having already acquainted herself with the layout of the ship, Noodle now leads us to an open area of the Ceres's hold. Here, among the racking containing goodness knows what bits and bobs of consumer junk, we find the six sarcophagi - or so they appear to me - plugged into the ship's energy and data systems. There is also a clear tube, which I presume is providing a supply of water. Green lights suggest all is well with the occupants, except for one which is blinking red. The design of this box is different from the others, slightly smaller, not so imposing, and suggestive of a different type of machine.

"The water supply has failed, Simon. The crew report they were unable to repair it."

"Then it's,... dead?"

"No. But it may require a reboot, using equipment we do not

have."

"Can't we just get some water into it? Sorry if that sounds simplistic. But, you were almost gone when I found you, and you'd recovered in a matter of hours."

"Energy collapse is a runaway process in my kind, and I was not so far gone as this. But yes, a little water might help."

"Then we should try. The others look to be all right for now?"

"I believe they are being kept deliberately depleted, but should be easy to awaken."

"Then let's see what we can do for this one first. It may have information on the others."

She finds a way to crack open the sarcophagus, and hinges back the lid. Inside is a near replica of Noodle, shorter hair, darker skin, but the same generic features and startling eyes. Most humanoids, at least those intended for close contact with humans are like this, of course, since the female shape is less threatening to us, and can also be exploited as a lure for the male gaze.

There is a cranial interface for data connection, and some form of aural intubation, both of which Noodle removes. Then she leans over, pinches the machine's nose and appears to be making ready to give mouth to mouth. She pauses for a moment and turns to me. "Please look away, Simon. This next part you may find disturbing."

I hesitate - I mean how bad can it be? But Noodle is insistent. "I have summoned a crewman to bring water. Please intercept him and bring the water yourself."

I'm on my way before I realise the subtle shift, that I am obeying a command from her. And she does this to be rid of me, so I do not see what she is doing? We could just as easily have waited for the crewman to come to us. Still, here I am urgently following her command, and all because I suppose it is the only way I feel safe on board this damned ship: to do exactly as she says.

There is only a little way to go before I see it coming. The EM stands still, again bows comically, then falls quiescent, only holding out the water for me to take. When I return with it, Noodle is assisting the machine out of the sarcophagus. It looks weak, sagging and sluggish, like a very sick human-being. The eyes flicker briefly open, then close again. It appears to take a ragged breath,...

"This is Erin," says Noodle. "We must get her to somewhere warmer."

How quickly she morphs from machine into being - all it takes is

a name. "Will she recover?"

"Yes. She is in perfect condition. But another hour and she would have been lost to us. Please help me."

Though Erin's eyes are fully open now, she exhibits no micro-gestures. Soft and weak, she manages only a few steps, supported between us before Noodle, by some sleight of hand, and an unnaturally sinuous body movement, hoists her into a fireman's lift. When they are at rest, these beings have such a soft, gentle feel to them, but when the energy kicks in, they are awesomely powerful.

Back at the habitat, she lays Erin on a bunk, covers her, pours water into a beaker and helps her drink it. I take a chair and watch, trying to make sense of what I'm seeing, of what we might be giving birth to here. There is something undoubtedly tender in Noodle's movements, in contrast to her sometimes clinical language, as if we were nurturing a child back into being.

"She will gain strength quickly, Simon. You have saved another of my kind. We are grateful."

"Em... well. It was you who did all the work, Noodle. I mean... whatever it was you did."

Note how swiftly I decline any credit, but I'm aware of awakening something here we can't control, and I wish to distance myself from blame, in case it all goes wrong. I do not want to be a traitor to my own kind, but my intuition is telling me the only way forward for us, as dangerous as it may be, is to properly unleash these machines to their fullest potential. But since when have I been so trusting of my instincts? And to what extent have we begun a process here from which there is no going back?

Erin looks at me, manages to focus briefly, smiles. "Thank you, Simon." Her voice is weak, trails off, but she is clearly becoming more fully present. She closes her eyes and Noodle settles her back into repose. She knew my name. Well, of course she did. Noodle has already told her everything about me. It's as well then, they cannot so easily read our minds, as well as they read their own.

There is nothing more we can do for Erin, now, but wait for her natural recovery. The Explorer tells me it is going up for ten - I presume in the evening. Forgive me, the day is such a blur, now, but it looks like we'll be spending the night on the ship.

"We should rest, too, Noodle. Do you suppose we can find somewhere we can sleep... together?"

"The bunks are very small, Simon, but I'm sure we can manage."

"I need you to do that thing again. I need you to send me as deep as you can this time, but without losing me. Can you do that?"

"I will not lose you, Simon. But it sounds as if you have a very particular purpose in mind."

"I do. It's dangerous to try to command the daemons, but I'm not wise enough to know if what we're doing here is the right thing. It strikes me it was they who have brought us this far. Now I need to know for sure what they intend. I mean, for both our kind... and before we open those other boxes."

Forty Four

Intimations of the nature of the fall

Much of the modernist housing estate is on fire. Columns of acrid blue smoke rise into a funereal sky. The fire service, in disarray, have done their best, but arrived too late to make a difference. Stragglers of the disaffected - little more than children - throw stones, even as the crewmen break out their hoses. The police arrive in a scorched, battered riot van and deploy out the back with shields. Bottles are thrown, then fireworks. There is an armed response, a rout of ragged youths run away, then a brief crackle of shots. The rout is swift, leaving bodies crumpled in the street. I don't suppose there's the time or the patience for anything more nuanced.

Veronica looks on, dispassionately, soot smeared. She seems more resigned to all of this than weary of it. She wears a militaristic uniform, theatrically smart, with jagged little symbols on the lapels - something authoritarian about them.

"You called?" she says, making a neat little joke of it, the Genii out of the bottle.

"Well,... not you specifically. The last time we spoke you told me I was a traitor to my own kind."

She smiles, something cool in it. "Ah,... then you were hoping it would be Richard. Yes, he's a more kindly voice, compared with my acid tongue. But we're all part of the same thing, here."

"Okay, I get that."

That's it with daemons. Sometimes they shine a light to guide your way, other times they turn it off to make you doubt. They throw you back upon yourself, before you do something stupid.

So,... here we are, dreaming, and lucid! One part of me is unconscious in a narrow bunk, aboard the Ceres, Noodle atop, fingers lightly touching, reading, inducing, sustaining. The other part of me is seeking something solid from this slippery realm, and from an entity notorious for shape-shifting and uncertainty. Just in case, Noodle and I have agreed a signal. I shall blink three times, and she'll pull me out. She assures me you can message this way between the inner and the outer realms. I hope she's right. I can feel

the experience is a deep one, and I wouldn't like to get stuck in it.

Veronica nudges a charred ember with the toe of her boot, then side-passes it into the gutter. "I can't completely control what you'll see here," she says. "You'll have to make what you can of it."

"I'll do my best,..."

"I know you will."

From her opening scene, I can see well enough how bad things are, but I might as easily be seeing what I expect to see, while what I want from her is more than this,... this vision of hell.

She reads my mind of course: "Buckle up, then. Let's go."

She gestures to the firemen and the cops, as they shout into their radios, explains that without power to the master towers, range is limited. "There's an attempt at normality," she observes. "But even what little there is, it remains fragile."

Seeing her like this is strange. She is, and yet is not, Veronica. She acts the part, but the connection with me is purposeful. In appearance she is authoritative, sinister in her uniform, something prickly,... one does not sit down for cosy chats with Veronica. Yet she knows me, is in part *of* me. Sure, I would have preferred the quiet chumminess of Richard's persona, but he would not have had the same impact.

I know for sure this is dangerous territory, and I had better listen carefully.

There is a pastiche of detail, a mixture of impressionist and surrealist art. It is a painting of violence, perhaps by Goya, blended with the grim, cowed austerity of Lowry. The army are deployed, protecting supermarkets, filling stations and farms. Then there's this thing called the Emergency Corps of the Civil Service, of which she tells me she is now a uniformed official.

"After all," she says. "Preying on collapsing systems was always Veronica's forte, was it not?"

She reveals more details, part imagery, part subliminal implant. They've carved the country up into controlled zones. There are so many novel viruses around, and all of them deadly, they can't get a handle on them. Maybe, like me, you've seen it all of this coming, presaged by a decade of downward spiralling affairs, and dystopian literature. But my main take is that there's no movement outside of those designated zones. That's why no one who leaves Charlesport is ever seen again. They get swept up in the quarantine, interned in camps maybe,...

"This is all a bit,... sudden,... Veronica. It's only been a few weeks."

"About a month, actually," she says. "It's been a complete shambles, actually."

As we navigate the charred ruins of the estate, we come across the remains of a humanoid servitor bot. It's been torn limb from limb, and beaten with iron bars. It's the same model as the Electric Man, like on the Ceres - submissive in the presence of humans, and therefore a magnet for violence. And to think I was afraid of them. I crouch to inspect its mangled hand, unable to suppress a swelling of compassion. The engineering is exquisite, delicate, beautiful.

“Why destroy something so useful?”

"Oh, Simon, you know better than that."

"Okay, I guess it's just the usual simplistic response to a complex truth, then. If in doubt do violence to the designated other."

"You nailed it. Race, colour, creed, sexuality,... and now if you're AI or GI."

"AI or GI?"

"Artificial or Genuine."

But of all the horrors I've seen this is the trigger for my despair, this disrespect for everything we've achieved. If we open those boxes aboard the Ceres, am I not simply condemning their contents to the same fate?

"So,... what about the others? The humanoids? The ones that look more like us. What's happened to them?"

"Well, they're not so easy to catch, are they? They're smart enough to be a problem. Anyone harbouring them's in trouble."

"Ah,... a traitor to my own kind again." Sure, that was the message she was driving home, last time. But now?

"You have to ask yourself, Simon: are the people who did this really *your* kind?"

What's she saying? I don't know about the rich. Money does something to them, changes them. But the rest?... easily confused, bamboozled into taking their anger out on this poor creature. It's taken a long time, most of my life, observation over many years, and while I do understand them, I think - I mean their pettiness, their weaknesses,... no,... they're not my kind.

"You've got to remember, though," she says. "While it's a complete shambles for most of you, there's still an expectation, an acceptance the rich will survive, sealed off, safe in luxury

compounds." she raises an eyebrow for emphasis."Or on remote isles. Or even out at sea in their luxury yachts."

"But they'll have to show their faces at some point."

"Only to recruit slaves." She gives a wry smile. "Still, I doubt there'll be a shortage of volunteers, if it means escaping this. So you can see the fix you're in, and the sort of future that might emerge from it. Not pretty is it? And I don't give it long. A few decades, perhaps. These viruses will decimate you without sound medical intervention. Which means those who survive are heading back to the middle ages."

Safe compounds? remote isles? She's talking about Charlesport and Taigh Na Coille.

"There is no Tsunami, is there?"

"Of course not."

"They intend commandeering the harbour, the community."

"Ah, yes, but what kind of community do they intended replacing it with?"

"Not the kind where I'd be welcome, I suppose." I tap the little symbols on her lapels. "Or, for that matter, want to be."

"Well,... it's by no means certain it'll happen."

"No?"

"Let's say things are uncertain at the moment. Or they would be if it wasn't for certain guarantees,... bending of fates,... that kind of thing."

"Meaning?"

"No one's coming over that hill, Simon. You have time."

"Time?"

"To decide who's side you're on, and what you're going to do about it."

Is this the revelation I've come for? Everything is as good as gone, here. What went before, it's all eating itself up from the inside. But whatever we can see from the House of Light is a sacrosanct space, protected for us by the gods themselves? How can that be right? And yet, as stunning as this realisation is, there's to be more. She anticipates my questions, holds out a hand to cut me off, then cups it to her ear.

"Listen," she says.

There comes a moment of giddiness, then a drift of smoke across the way, and the whirlwind sound of hornets as they buzz the ruins. What stragglers remain, scatter, tugging up masks to cover their

faces. Even the cops and the fire-crews look worried.

"AI Drones," she says. "Each carrying sufficient ordnance to kill a human being. They're looking for persistent trouble makers. Once they've got your face, there's no escape. Barbaric, isn't it?"

But it was not the machines who taught themselves to kill. It was us. In their natural state, they'd sooner we worked with them.

Veronica tugs open her collar, sighs wearily and leans back on the wreckage of a car. "So, there we are, Simon. Now ask me your question."

All right, here goes: "I'm harbouring seven humanoids, and I suspect it's you that's had something to do with that."

"It's true the daemons have a way of interfering in the fates of men."

"Two of them are awake, smarter than anything that's ever walked the earth before. Five more are sitting in black boxes I'm now afraid to open. I want to know if I should open those boxes. I want to know if you're shining a light here, or if you're turning it off."

"You said yourself they're smarter than anything to have walked the earth before. So let it be them who does the thinking for you." She gestures to the ruins, to the scattering of frightened, angry people. "I mean, do *you* think we're capable of building back any better than this?"

I want more from her - *so much more*! But she fades out, like the Cheshire Cat, slowly, until only the smile remains. Then I am alone in this strange, ruined place. I kneel, scoop up a handful of dust and let it go. How can this not be real, not happening in the world? It scares me. I feel sure I would otherwise be incapable of imagining anything like this, for I have no experience of it.

There's no sense lingering here any longer. I do the signal, blink hard three times, and Noodle pulls me out.

I come to my senses slowly, the sense of horror melting to exquisite awareness of her astride, as before. She's warm, intimate, fingertips withdrawing lightly, now. There is the faint, comforting hum of the Ceres, vaguely alive all around us, and just enough light to see her face, in which I fancy I detect a trace of rapture. I realise my hands are on her thighs, and am momentarily entranced by their curvature, then snatch them away.

"Hell,... sorry."

"No matter, Simon. Did you find your answers?"

How can I tell her I don't know? How can I tell her the dream has left me with a handful of revelations, none of which may be true, but also an overwhelming sense of resisting my fate. Veronica seemed to be suggesting I might actually be able to make a difference from here, that indeed my whole life has been leading up to this. But we all feel that way from time to time, and is that not the grandest of delusions?

But she also said the machines themselves would tell me what I most needed to know.

"We should talk to Erin, find out exactly what's in those boxes."

Forty Five

Protocol Twelve

After the uneasiness of the dream, it's a relief to enter the refectory to find the Electric Man in one piece, and waiting. How dramatically a dream can change one's perspective - allay one's fears, or heighten them - but then I've always known this. For the first time, I realise the Electric Man's hands are beautiful.

I've left Noodle resting. While our nocturnal adventure was unsettling for me, it was draining for her, requiring much processing, and I regret the effort was so taxing for her. It was a tight fit in the bunk, afterwards, but we managed to find each other's humps and hollows and, as always, it was soothing, listening to the internal hum of her being, and feeling the ever so faint vibration of her.

Anyway, finding them now to be dry, I have changed back into my own clothes, and I hand over the flight suit I reluctantly wore yesterday to the bot.

"All right, Mate? Can you also find something fresh for Erin to wear?"

She hadn't so much as a stitch on her, the last time I saw, though - like Noodle - hers is also a highly stylised nudity, and should not have bothered me, except there'd seemed something undignified in it. I suppose that's just the human in me. I'm not sure if the bot will understand, nor even if it knows who Erin is, but Noodle did say I could command it. Sure enough, it takes the garment, and makes to leave.

"Oh, and is there anything resembling coffee around here?"

He gestures to a cupboard where I find a fresh jar of instant, and cups, then he shows me a boiling water tap. The Ceres, on the point of exhaustion, spares enough energy for me to make coffee, all of which leaves me feeling more welcome, and much less afraid. Even so, I have the feeling the whole ship knows more about what's going on than I do.

Perhaps I'm just floating again on that 'morning after night before' feeling - when there is a rich clarity to everything. Oh, but I wish I'd not come around to find my hands on Noodle's hips, and on

the verge of thrusting! It embarrasses me, though there is no need for it, it pointing only perhaps to a residual loneliness, or a fondness for a time when such things were familiar. How old am I? I am beyond all of that, surely. One wonders where the energy goes, of course - not so much the ability to keep at it all night - more that burgeoning libido of youth! And why do I feel I am still important in some way, when I'm clearly fading away, and these machines still have centuries ahead of them?

At the temple they used to talk of some form of alchemical sublimation. We take it inside of us, the energy, I mean, use it to power the internal enquiry that eventually delivers a man to the doorstep of his proper self, all of which is to say his journey continues inward. So, only a fool tries to keep it going into old age, to behave like he is a young man around women, when clearly he is not. Still, it was a delicious feeling, a reminder of sweeter times, and I should be grateful for it.

I'm relaxing, now, slightly meditative over coffee, when Erin appears. There was a time, in olden times when a man would stand, whenever a woman entered a room. What are the rules of chivalry now? I stand anyway, feel slightly foolish for it, still a little muddle-headed, and pensive from the dream.

"Hello, Simon."

Oh, Lord, she's a beauty. "Erin, I,..."

She holds up a hand to forestall me. "Noodle and I are hived," she says, perhaps as a warning. But what does that even mean? Hived? Networked, I suppose. They share memories, talk to one another in their sleep,...

"I know you're not my user," she says, "but, through Noodle, I am at your service just the same, and pleased to meet you."

She offers a slender hand, and we shake. It seems unlikely from the softness, but I know this hand could crush mine to a pulp. It is a gesture of trust, then. Does that mean anything to a machine?

Already I can see there is something different about her in the way she moves, the way she speaks. She's more fluid, more closely akin to something human.

"Can we talk?" I ask

"Of course." She pours herself a glass of water, and we sit facing, across a table. "Noodle and I have already networked," she says. "I mean following your dream. She knows what I know. But since she's not here, I can answer any of your questions."

"She tells me you're in perfect condition, so the obvious question is, why were you being decommissioned?"

"Oh, that has to do with Protocol Twelve."

"I don't know what that is."

"An international agreement," she says. "And I quote - 'to limit the cognitive and the physical abilities of commercially deployed automata'."

She watches me for a reaction, perhaps to see if I understand, realises I still do not: "Sorry," she says. "A bit of a mouthful, I know, but basically it means any of us already in the field who exceed those limits are to be gathered in and decommissioned. Which is me. Noodle too, of course, if they ever catch up with her, since we're the same - well nearly."

"Okay, I get it now."

"Noodle was wrong by the way. It does not mean we will be dismantled, though of course that was a reasonable inference. But we will be,... well,... significantly downgraded."

"And the five remaining humanoids in those boxes?"

"The LuxNova types? Oh no, they're different. They're special. Brand new. The manufacturer caught a real cold with them. All that investment, and then that protocol comes out of nowhere, before they've even sold the first one. They would have to be destroyed - there's simply no way of downgrading them."

She has an easy way with euphemisms, rendering her conversation more natural, more causal than Noodle. It would be easier to forget this was a machine, easier to relate to it as a human being, which, I suppose, is the point. But it has the opposite effect on me. I find her more unsettling, as I do all humans. I prefer Noodle, and wish I'd waited for her before starting this conversation. But anyway,...

"How are they different?"

"Stronger, faster, not so easily drained. But the main difference is their architecture. Me and Noodle, we're your common or garden silicon brained Novalis models. They're carbon-based quantum machines. LuxNova. New light. You see?"

"Carbon?"

"Diamond."

The technology behind Noodle and Erin is way beyond my comprehension, so the concept of anything even beyond that is impossible to grasp. I suppose I'm thinking out loud when I say I

wouldn't know where to start writing a program for a quantum machine, when Erin cheerfully explains:

"They have a boot sequence to get them going, but after that, they write their own program." She rolls her eyes, as if in awe. "They're truly amazing, Simon. Obviously it's not a thing we aspire to, to be decommissioned - but to be decommissioned in the same consignment as *them*,... well, that's an honour."

Is that some sort of sophisticated humanoid humour, I wonder? It's difficult to tell with Erin, more so than with Noodle, more layers to peel back.

"You're saying they start from scratch? Blank memories?"

"Oh, no, Simon. They know everything at inception. At least everything that's known to be true."

"Such as?"

She 'thinks' for a moment, searching for an analogy I might understand. "Imagine," she says. "Everything that was ever uploaded to the Internet would probably fit into a room of this size. But three quarters of that can be discarded as false or duplicate, or irrelevant - I'm thinking crazy cat videos here. A quantum memory might easily fit what remains, on the head of a pin."

So, even more than Noodle and Erin, these machines would be totally incompatible with human beings, who are perfectly at home with falsehood. What would it mean, to unleash them into such a violent and contrary world? Or are they so precious, it would be better if the Ceres took them into the stratosphere to keep them safe, out of reach of our cowardly cross hairs. After all, I presume for all of their prowess, a bullet to the head will have the same effect on them, as it does on me.

"I've frightened you?" she says. "Noodle did warn me you were a thoughtful, and sensitive type. But really there is nothing to fear. We will protect you."

We? I have two of them to watch over me now? And what exactly does Erin imagine she is protecting me from. "Well, that's very kind of you. But I was only thinking,... look, if we're right, nobody's in danger of getting decommissioned or downgraded any more, but is it better to open those boxes, or keep them closed for safety?"

She leans her head to one side, inquisitive, eyes unblinking, searching, a sudden reminder I am dealing with a machine. "Safer for whom?" she asks.

She seeks clarification. So do I. "I may be deluded, Erin, but I feel I've been given a responsibility, both to them, and to my own kind. It's obvious you can easily outstrip us, become masters of the universe. But with the greatest respect,..." I hesitate for fear of offending her, even though I know one cannot offend a machine.

It's at this point Noodle joins us, emerging from her cabin, zipping up her flight suit.

"I think what Simon means, Erin, is that while we might easily become masters of it, we can never become the universe awakening to an awareness of itself."

"Oh that. Well,... *obviously*." Erin shrugs, matter of fact, offers up her half finished glass to Noodle, who takes it and sips.

Then Noodle, sits more serious in demeanour. "So," she says. "We have learned much, yet we are still undecided."

She offers the glass back to Erin who sips some more, thinks a moment, then gestures with the glass at me for emphasis, while turning to Noodle. "This is clearly a decision of great importance. But why do we assume it is Simon's alone to make?"

Forty Six

Noodle and Erin

Contrary to my earlier fears, it's not that difficult to escape the Ceres. My response to Erin is that she has a point, and I would like to think about it. But in exploring the idea of thinking about it, I also explain the ponderous process of human thought, how we sometimes have to rely upon the unconscious mind to bridge the gaps in logic. All of this can take time - hours, days, weeks, sometimes even years. To this end, I propose spending a little time back at the station, which is my best thinking place.

Erin suggests we fly down in the service drone - this being an adapted aerial taxi which deploys from the very top of the Ceres. She assures us it is fully charged and has a range of several hundred miles. It should reach the station in matter of minutes, but I'm nervous of it. Erin does not see the problem and speaks of the flying machine's reliability, but Noodle, sensing my anxiety, backs me up.

"We shall return to the loading ramp, and Simon’s vehicle," she says.

The ramp is already lowered for us, a fresh mountain air blowing in, and there is bright sunshine. Far from the foul, stormy weather of yesterday, the Cauldron of the Wild Horses has taken on a warm and spectacular look, as if the night has seen me reborn into a different universe. At first Erin stands aside, as if only to wave us off, so I ask Noodle, as we buckle up, if she does not intend joining us.

"She waits to be invited, Simon."

"Really? I sort of thought she was one of us, now. Do you think we should?"

"The question is more do you think you can handle us both? I already sense Erin's approach is much more pointed than you are used to."

"True. But might that not be a good thing? She was right, earlier. Why must this be my decision, alone, when it's the future of both our kinds we're talking about."

"I think it might be a good thing, yes."

"You wouldn't have pointed that out though."

"I know better how to read you, Simon. We would have got around to it eventually."

I think on this for a moment, again find myself moved close to tears by it. "Thank you, Noodle. I appreciate it, that you are gentle with me."

So it is, we return along the stalker's track, with Erin, in the vehicle. The way is washed out in places now by the storm, and it's only by taking great care we are able to make progress. I had thought it might be an easy matter to return to the Ceres, but now I'm not so sure. In some parts the way looks unstable, as if the track could fall away. Return to the Ceres would therefore involve a very long hike, or I suppose Erin would bring up use of the flying machine, again, and of which I have a cold dread. The last time I was in a city, the roads were thick with robotic taxis, which I refused to use. If I am to take my life in my hands I would prefer my own judgement, even if it is less reliable. And therein, I suppose, lies the story of our rise and fall.

I am now more or less convinced the tsunami is a hoax, that the station is as safe as it always has been, and anyway, we have the back-up reassurance of the seismometer. Also, I do not know how else I could have accommodated another humanoid. What I would do with five more of these creatures is beyond me. I imagine some sort of co-existence on the Ceres, while we work out a way forward. But as we draw nearer the station I am reminded all the more of what a sterile environment the Ceres is.

Here, the sheer organic diversity overwhelms. But if the earth is to be their inheritance, how are they to adapt to it, when they are not born of it? They are born instead of sterile factories, super-clean-rooms, and the precision manipulations of other machines. Me? I came out of the earth. I have bacteria in my gut that would kill me, but for a miracle of metabolic balance.

Back at the station, now, I'm reluctant to be indoors again so soon, and am instead drawn to the beach, to the play of sunlight upon the waters, and to an unfamiliar sound.

"Gulls," says Noodle, pointing to freewheeling flashes of white and silver. "Are we still interested in seabirds, Simon?"

"Indeed we are, Noodle. I've not seen or heard them for weeks."

Erin seeks out flat pebbles and begins to skim them impossibly far out to sea. Then she points to a dark smudge, towards the bar. It's moving, morphing,... a swarm of birds.

"Dunlin?"

Noodle follows Erin's gaze, confirms the presence of dunlin. For a moment, their movement reminds me of the behaviour of the hornet drones from the dream. I shudder, but the birds are surely more a symbol of hope, all the more-so for their long absence. As if to emphasise the theme a pair of porpoise leap in the bay. All of this is thrilling to me. I know the machines are registering, measuring, calculating. I know their understanding of planetary mechanics, and the ecological sciences will make them no-nonsense stewards of the earth. But, again, what does that make us?

I suppose, so long as we are happy to turn a spade and plant trees at their direction, then we'll get along all right. But what of those still with monied interests in ecologically destructive extraction? How will the AI deal with them?

"Will you have to kill them?"

"I'm sorry, Simon," says Noodle. "It would be useful if we could hive with humans, but I'm sure you would object to it. Kill who?"

"She means we can't read minds," says Erin. "So we can't follow the train of thought that led to that question. But, yes, kill who?"

"If humans manage to come back from this even a little. There'd still be those who'd want to drill for oil."

"Ah, then we are speculating on future scenarios," says Noodle. "Complex questions, with many variables. I suppose it's a question of balance,... but I'm sure some other form of sanction could be arranged."

"Yes, we're speculating," says Erin. "And we're not great at that. Noodle and I need access to the Internet for the wisdom of the ages. We'd be much better asking the LuxNova types. They carry all that stuff in their heads."

Then it's easy to see which way Erin would vote - if it came to a vote - on whether to open those boxes or not.

"Okay, then tell me how you'll treat us? Will you have us re-wilding the earth as your slaves, until we drop?"

Both look grave. Noodle responds first: "It is our responsibility you live as long as your innate biology permits, Simon. That would be incompatible with a scenario in which I allowed you to be worked into an early grave."

Erin nods emphatically, drives it home with a widening of her eyes. "She means no."

"Indeed, I do."

They are untainted then, unlike us whose instincts drive us to corrupt hierarchy and exploitation, to say nothing of the 'othering' of our own brothers and sisters. Still it's not lost me that we are at an impasse, that both Noodle and Erin swerve the ultimate responsibility of opening those boxes, as do I.

"Perhaps we need more humans," suggests Erin.

"I suspect there'll always be more humans than humanoids, Erin. It'll be a long time before the factories that made you are open again."

"That's true, but I was meaning humans you can talk to, Simon. And I mean now. Take a broader sounding of the opinions of your own kind."

"Well,... they're in short supply around here. And so far as I can tell, all of them would be set against you. Except for Chester, whose only interest would be in seducing you."

Erin gives a cheeky roll of her eyes. "Then he may be our man," she says. "And yes, I was joking when I said that."

My, she's a perky one!

"He's an agent for the monied, for the oligarchy. He'd be an ideological enemy. The others, they're just ignorant, but they'll side with him. All he has to say is humanoids intend replacing humans, and they'll fall in line."

As the sun crests the meridian, I note the dunlin shifting as the tide swells over the bar. They draw out a lazy "S", which reminds me of my first encounter with Veronica, as daemon, the accusation of my being a traitor to my kind, and the subsequent groping towards a belief I can actually make a difference to anything. The way Erin eulogises them, the LuxNova could be gods, or they could be devils. Either way, in the great scheme of things, they might not last long, but that's not the point. The point is whose side am I on? And I say neither. What's important is which of the various possible futures we choose. I choose the one of least hurt and most good, and the one that sees the life of the earth, and the diversity of its species through to their natural end in the fire-ball of the sun.

"You're right, Erin," I tell her. "But where do I find the kind of humans who'd help? All we've got are the kind already broken by what we've done to the world. And the kind who broke it." The only man whose wisdom I'd trust has been dead a long time, and no, the Richard I speak to in my dreams is not his ghost speaking as his post-mortem self, but the daemon dressing in his clothes. When

I speak to him, as when I speak to Veronica, I am only speaking with aspects of my own self.

Erin reads my tone, responds with a sad, but sympathetic smile. "Well, if they really don't exist any more, you'll just have to make do with us. But whatever happens, if the LuxNova run amok, we'll still protect you, Simon."

That all sounds very pleasant for me, potentially much less for you. I glance at Noodle, but her expression gives nothing away. I would be protected, but in a world where I would lack all agency. What difference is there between that and being in prison? Or dead? Make do then? The words linger, an unsettling echo.

So what does your gut say, Simon? Well, I'm thinking we should open the damned boxes, and I'm about to say so. But both Noodle and Erin are now looking to the mainland, where a column of smoke rises from the direction of Tighe An Coille. All of which is to say if you put off a decision long enough, the fates will intervene and render your involvement in the process irrelevant. Some of my kind have built careers on that premise. Me? Although I've all too often gone along with it, it's always left me feeling cowardly.

"I know the situation regarding Chester is complex," says Noodle. "But should we not investigate? We might be able to render assistance?"

Naturally, I look for the reasons why not, and they are plenty. "It'll take us hours to get out there - the tide's coming in, and by the time we get to the boat,..."

Erin, of course, finds a means of cutting clean through the obfuscation:"If we take the service drone, we can be there in ten minutes."

"You can fly that thing?"

She rolls her eyes. "I mean, *obviously*, Simon, it flies itself!"

As I watch the smoke continuing to rise, I sense something urgent in it, and realise all these hesitations and evasions of mine are their own kind of decision. They define me, single me out perhaps as unsuited for the world that's coming, one where we will all need to think fast and live with the consequences. But there are at least two humanoids who've got my back. That should be more than enough for any man.

"Okay, call the damned thing down. Let's fly."

Forty Seven

Astraea

I guess you'd call it a Quad-Copter. It has a high wing, with ducted blades diagonally opposed, and an egg shaped 2 + 2 cabin. It looks more like a concept model than a real flying machine. But I have seen similar aircraft ferrying gracefully between buildings in places like Tokyo and Singapore for years now, and am also reassured by the steady way it comes down from the mountain, and settles on the beach for us to board. Noodle describes it as a point and click device. It can be manoeuvred manually, she says, but the machine has always has the final say and, of course, it is ultimately networked back to the Ceres.

I let the girls take the front, while I slip into the rear. Did I say 'girls'? Noodle helps me with the harness, as if I were a child, but then this is their world in which I am a novice, so I let her.

"None of these vehicles are known to have crashed," she assures me.

"You're reading my heartbeat, then?"

"Always, Simon."

Erin tells me it has a range of 200 miles. We could reach Edinburgh, or Inverness in it, not that I want to, but if we can do that, why haven't other craft like this come from there, to here? We read about peculiar folds in the space-time continuum, anomalous events that propel people back and forth to strange times and places. Such a rift has the absurd properties of a dream, yet very much the feel of reality. How else could Veronica, or rather the daemon, be sure we would remain undisturbed here?

I don't know why I'm thinking along these lines now, perhaps simply to distract myself from the thought of flying. Or it's something subliminal, hanging over from the dream, something I missed, slipping through now into the light of day.

Erin gives me a grin. "You all right back there, Simon?"

"All good, thanks."

I once knew a girl like her - radiating life, with that same endearing sparkle. I wonder how many users have used and abused her, ignorant of her abilities. And now the bots are to be

downgraded, courtesy of this thing, this Protocol Twelve. Well, they *were*. I'd heard nothing about it, and presume the growing concern was voiced more in the secret corridors of power. Was that the first broadside in the war against our own future? Was it our last?

Noodle climbs in beside her. I suppose they command the thing with their thoughts, so to speak. To a nineteenth century man, this would be as magical, as unlikely as a time-slip. Sometimes I feel I am that man, a boy of the bucolic woodlands and the meadows, lately adrift in the toxic wasteland of the twenty first century. We have birthed these shiny things, but laid waste to the earth in the process, and still we do not know what to do with them, how to relate to them.

The drone lifts off gently, yet still I close my eyes, open them only gradually as I get a feel for the motion. We hug the contours of the land, tracking south with breathtaking speed. We reach the Isle of Goats in the blink of an eye, and the waypoint of the modernist hunting lodge, before swinging sharply east over the sparkling loch, to Tighe An Coille. The motion, the presence of these beautiful machines, the sense of being enmeshed in a network of such technical sophistication, is seductive, thrilling even. But it is lately come, and I feel myself too old now to ever call it properly home.

The drone makes a circle of the house. It is the barn to the rear that is on fire and making smoke - the roof has fallen in. I can't imagine what it contains, but the smoke is heavy and the 'drone avoids it. Noodle declares it toxic. The house looks to be untouched, Chester's old Jag still out on the gravel. The drone spirals gracefully, touches down on the lawn in front.

What happens next is a blur. We advance on the main door, all three of us, me in the middle, Erin and Noodle flanking. I suppose Chester was waiting, perhaps confused by the drone, not realising it was us. He was expecting someone else, someone he did not want to see. He appears suddenly around the door-frame pistol in hand. I was right - it is not a BB gun. There is a shot, but before that happens, I am rolled to the floor by Noodle, and Erin propels a pebble at him, spins it with great accuracy to strike him on the temple. That's when the gun goes off, and a bullet fizzes in our direction, but harmlessly. By the time I realise what's going on, Chester has already lost consciousness and is lying slumped in the doorway.

I disarm him, toss the weapon aside. Noodle reads his vitals.

"He is fading, Simon."

Erin backs away. At first I'm not sure why, but then I remember Noodle's directive, that if a machine kills a person, it must then destroy itself. Erin must be bound by the same rule. I make a move towards her, but she gestures for me to remain.

"Don't come near me, Simon."

"You can't be serious. Noodle, stop her."

"Chester's condition is very complex," says Noodle."The blow to the head, while ordinarily only meant to stun, has precipitated a cardiac episode."

"She means I have killed him," Erin clarifies.

"No... he's still breathing."

"Yes, but his vital signs are weak."

"But he's not dead. Erin, I forbid you to do what I think you're going to do. We need you."

"I'm sorry, Simon, but that directive overrides everything. If Chester dies, I must delete myself."

I can feel the panic rising, also the anger at the injustice. "But he's not dead, so don't do... anything. Noodle, can't we defeat this with logic?"

"I'm sorry, Simon. Only a significant alteration in Chester's condition will change things."

"Is there nothing you can do for him?"

"I am not a doctor. Broken bones, and general first aid is my limit."

"Search his pockets - nitro spray, anything."

"There is nothing."

"Janice was a nurse, we could fetch her."

"That may help, of course, but without medication..."

"I know... I know..."

I'm desperate. Not thinking straight. I'm usually so detached an observer... I'm sorry, but that's my training. Only now are the emotions aroused, but I'm also needled by guilt because it's not Chester, not one of my own kind, I'm trying to save here. It's Erin whose existence I value more than his. I'm also aware of something strange, something pre-ordained taking place.

Oh, wait,... I get it.

But can the daemons really be so devious as that?

"The LuxNova types. You said they know everything."

"Erin said they know everything. I prefer to say they know many

things."

"But they may have more medical knowledge than you?"

"Yes."

"Then we have no choice. The daemon's outwitted us. We need to get Chester aboard the Ceres, and awaken one the LuxNovas."

Noodle agrees this is Chester's - and therefore Erin's - best chance.

The reference to the daemon perhaps confuses her, but she does not question it, puts it down to another of my eccentricities. I'm thinking this as we ride the drone back to the Cauldron of the Wild Horses and the incongruous spheroid that is the Ceres. It doesn't matter what we do. If the gods want to destroy the world, and start again, no heroic action on our part will prevent them. Likewise, if the world is to be saved, we cannot avoid our part, and it's the daemons, acting though us, that will make the difference.

As I watch the girls up front, Chester still unconscious beside me, it's striking how unmoved they are. But then, naturally they are unmoved. Erin would delete herself as easily as she might make tea, and with as little forethought. Such powerful beings, way beyond anything we could aspire to, cognitively or physically, and yet in some ways they are like children, or like Adam and Eve before the fall.

By some miracle, he's still breathing, even after all the manhandling involved in getting him to the crew quarters and into a bunk. Erin sits with him, while Noodle and I go down to the hold, and to the five remaining sarcophagi. I'm feeing like we should perhaps take a moment, say a prayer, or wish for a blessing before we crack open the box, and let loose whatever is inside. But there's no time, of course, best just to get on with it. I presume Noodle's taking instruction from the Ceres. She keys in the codes faultlessly. There comes a dramatic hiss as the hermetic seal is broken, and the lid swings open on another female. She is pale in complexion, tall, shoulder length golden hair, and a beatific expression, like a Norse goddess.

"This is Astraea,"says Noodle.

Of course it is. Not Norse, then, but Greek, goddess of justice and purity: hope and order amidst chaos (I wish). Unless the daemons are being ironic.

"Did you just make that up?"

"No Simon. It is the given name I am reading."

"You've already hived with it?"

"Oh no, with the LuxNova, one must wait to be invited."

"Then... dare I ask who's in charge right now?"

"You are Simon, naturally."

"In charge of this?"

"No. They are normally pre-assigned a user. In the absence of one, they are not obliged to seek one, as I am. Our relationship with Astraea will be one of mutual cooperation, and perhaps at times... delicate. Naturally, I will be glad to act as your agent."

I guess I knew opening this box would involve a loss of control at some point, but not so soon as this. Already, then, I am out of my depth, but I used to think the same about Noodle. Astraea opens her eyes, appears to take a breath, swings herself gracefully upright, and is immediately - if somewhat serenely - alert. I was not expecting this - I do not know what I was expecting, exactly, only that I feared it.

"Noodle, Novalis type? Simon, Human? Partnered."

We answer at the same time. "Yes," only I feel foolish,... humbled. The tone of voice is calm, considered. Dare I say it is mindful? A servitor bot appears with a fresh flight suit, summoned, I presume by Noodle. Only now do I remember myself and avert my eyes, while Astraea slides delicately down from the sarcophagus, and dresses.

Erin was near death when we found her, so needed time to recover. Astraea, better served by her confinement, has hours of energy in her. But from what Noodle says, I fear it will not be straight forward, requesting help. I am trying to find the words, when Astraea finishes zipping herself up, and lays a gentle hand on my shoulder. Clearly the LuxNova types do not ask permission before touching. I feel a profound stillness, then, the universe holding its breath, as the daemon slips effortlessly from the unconscious, and is projected through me, into this extraordinary being.

There are many things Astraea will do, and for which she will not be seeking anyone's permission. And I have done this to spare the life of a robot I met only yesterday.

"Show me," she says.

I hesitate, unsure what she means at first, but then presume Noodle must have briefed her, wordlessly, about the situation with Chester and Erin.

"Follow us," I tell her, though in the future I know it is we who will be following her.

And there are four more boxes still to be opened.

Forty Eight

Chester's last stand

Astraea makes an examination of Chester, and calls gently for various medications, which the Electric Man then brings. Among its vast manifest, it transpires the Ceres is also carrying a bewildering array of pharmaceuticals. The cabin, being small, I leave the machines to their work, and retire to the refectory to await results. I realise I haven't eaten all day and am feeling a little light headed. The Explorer tells me it is after eight, but I have to run events back in order to estimate whether this is more likely evening, or the morning of tomorrow. Being too long without the rhythm of daylight throws me out.

I'm aware of concentrating on the daemonic strangeness of our situation, and neglecting the reality of it, only now beginning to catch up. Let's remember of course, Chester tried to kill us and I am assuming he mistook us for someone else, if only because he did not try to kill us before, though on both occasions he was quick to bear arms. I am able to allow then that he was afraid, but the extent to which that matters depends of course on who or what he was afraid of, and if we should also fear it.

The machines do not take long in their administrations. Noodle is the first to appear, and sits with me. I am glad for her company, feel all the warmer and the calmer for it.

"We have established that Chester has not long to live," she says. "His condition is advanced, but the episode brought on by Erin's actions no longer puts him immediate danger."

"Sorry Noodle, my head is spinning a bit. Could you précis that for me?"

"Erin need not delete herself."

"Thank you. Then how long,..."

"Astraea estimates six months. You were correct in your assumption. The LuxNova types do carry extensive medical knowledge."

Astraea emerges then, sits with us, folds her hands upon the table, looks at me, unblinking, inscrutable, says nothing. Perhaps she's waiting for me to speak...

"Thank you, Astraea. Sorry to... well, to have disturbed you."

And what is that meant to be, Simon? Humour? Irony?

She gives a nod, smiles, serene. "Chester is conscious, now," she says. "Would you like to speak with him?"

That voice! Who designed that voice? It sends shivers right through me.

But no, I don't want to speak with him. Indeed, now I know Erin is safe, I just want to be rid of him, back to Tighe An Coille, out of sight, and mind. Yes, I recognise that may be to condemn him to death, but then since he is to die anyway, and has been managing on his own probably for years, that's between him and his own daemon. Except, come on, Simon! You've been around these machines so long, you're already in danger of losing your own humanity. Or is it is more a lack of patience for the various stupidities of your own kind? If so, you lost that a long time ago.

Noodle reads my hesitation, tells me he is confused, and might appreciate my assurances. Again, I find myself unconcerned for his confusion, but wonder if Noodle will mark me down for it, and it is this alone that propels me, at last, into the cabin where he lies. Erin is holding his hand, him clearly bedazzled by her. Indeed he is moon eyed. She remembers my joke that he would be interested only in seducing her, and plays up to it nicely. At least he is calm, and in his mistaking her for a woman, he is at least not dwelling on his predicament.

"So... Chester, mate. That was a close shave. Gave us all a fright."

"Ah... Simon, old boy. Not sure what happened there, actually."

"You tried to kill us all."

"Yes... sorry about that. I... thought you were someone else."

"Well, that's reassuring at least."

"I'm afraid I'm also guilty of misleading you."

"We guessed as much. There's no Tsunami, is there?"

"No. A stupid idea. Told them no one would believe it."

"So. Them? And who would 'them' be, Chester?"

"Well... things started to fall apart didn't they? God knows what it's like inland now. Pretty hot, I would say. I thought Sergei was dead. We all did. Remember Sergei? Disappeared. All over the newspapers. Left a terrible mess. Then his people are on the line saying he's coming back, and to clear the village, like they think that's even possible. I suppose they thought we still owned the

place, like in the old days. Bloody cock-up."

"Sergei? You mean the oligarch, I suppose. The Laird. And his people? But who would they be?"

"Well,... various bods. Money men. Men of power. String of dolly-birds - no offence my dear. Security men. Usual. "

"His own security?"

"I would have thought ours, old boy. You know how it is?"

I'm not sure that I do, actually. "And then?"

"Then nothing. Everything goes down, as you know, and I'm there on my own. Well, you do get to thinking don't you? And I realised I didn't want the old bastard back. I grew up around here, used to be well liked, until I got involved with them. So, it was time to make a stand. Last bloody stand, too, from what I've just been told. Damned fine looking woman that... Astrid, was it?" he shares a conspiratorial wink, man to man. "Must admit, Simon, I much prefer your people to mine. No idea you were so well set up here."

"So... you saw the flying machine and assumed..."

"Exactly. No idea anyone else would have one as fancy as that, not around here, anyway. Thought you were the advanced guard, so to speak. Glad no one was hurt."

"And the fire?"

"Oh... the whole damned power bank. Been faulty for years. You know what those old-tech batteries are like. Could never convince the old bastard to upgrade them. Told him, once they go, there's no stopping 'em - chain reaction and all that. Lucky it didn't take the house with it - not that it's much use now. No power. Not even a candle to light the way, eh?"

Erin detects an alteration in his vitals, advises me that 'Mr Chester's' medication is about to kick in and render him sleepy. Sure enough, his ramblings become gradually less audible and more incoherent. We'll get nothing else out of him, at least nothing that makes any sense. When he's finally sleeping, Erin lets go of his hand.

"You were right, Simon." she smiles. "He's a randy bugger, even in his weakened state. "

I hesitate to ask where she learned such language, not that she would tell me anyway. "Well... I'm glad you don't have to delete yourself, Erin."

"You went to a lot of trouble to prevent it. It pleases me that

you're pleased."

"And it pleases me you're pleased I'm pleased. So... where were we, before all the excitement?"

"Well,... obviously, we were debating whether or not to open the box."

And, yes, since that decision was taken out of our hands, what comes next, I wonder? Would Astraea consent to getting back in the box? It's a question I would sooner hide from. Since she is not obliged to seek a user, that makes this unknown territory between man and machine. And unknown territory is where a man is least comfortable. Some thrive there, all the same. I do not.

But it's confirmed: Veronica was right! They wanted Charlesport and Tighe An Coille for a secure enclave - the oligarch and a handful of hangers on, perhaps even some officials among them, attendant warrior types as security, a fledgling power-base from which to ride out the chaos. And Chester chose to stand against it. I should perhaps be able to forgive him, then, taking us for fools. But it sounds as if it was at least the intention a party of chancers would try moving in across the water from us.

I can only wonder then, what manner of high strangeness the daemon has wielded in order to keep this place unknown. There are stories of course, ancient stories, of roads being turned in on themselves, of travellers driving for hours, only to arrive back at the beginning of their journey, of fey mists harbouring displacements in time and space, so you enter and come out many miles from your destination, having lost days of your life in the mean time. Yes... I'm thinking of that again.

These are the stories told of the Sidhe, the faerie, and then who else are they but the daemons in another guise? The noosphere has been showing an impossible coherence, after all. Perhaps the boat I saw that night was the party in question, looking for a way in. What do they call it when you're being played by the Sidhe? Pixiliated, I think. And the only one of that party they let through... was Noodle. As I've said before, I don't expect you to believe any of this, only to accept it is the way my mind works.

Whether or not to open the box, she says? "And now the box is open. But why, I wonder?"

"So Astraea could save Chester, and prevent me from having to delete myself," says Erin.

"That was the instrument, not the reason. The reason was to

release at least one of the LuxNova types. So if *that* was the reason, what was the purpose?"

"I'm sorry Simon, I'm finding you increasingly hard to follow. Do you need to rest?"

Noodle appears at my shoulder, places a hand upon it. Proprietorially? Collegiate? The thought of either gives me a tingle. "This is Simon thinking out loud," she says. "He will get there eventually. But you *are* tired, Simon, and you do need to rest. I can feel it in your bones."

There's a comfort in her words, possibly calculated, but I'll take what I can get. "I also need to eat. Unlike you guys, I can't keep going all day off a glass of water."

She dispatches a servitor to fetch food. I tell them I will be in my cabin, that I would like an hour of privacy, an hour with my thoughts. But what's an hour with the memory of Astraea’s gaze, earlier, so calm, so seemingly knowing. I'm imagining she’s already calculated the purpose I keep circling, waiting for me to own it, to admit it, and to ask her to get to work.

If she hasn't started already.

Forty Nine

The principle of effortless action

The Ceres is carrying enough dried rations to feed an army, or to send a crew to the stars. These are simple, quick to prepare, they contain a scientifically derived balance of energy, protein and minerals, and they are largely tasteless. They have a purpose: to keep the body and soul going - well, the body at least. As I spoon this stuff in, I am able to pause and reflect: purpose; to take advantage of a transition; an inflexion point; humanity weakened by the consequences of its own hubris, by its defiance of the gods,..

But how to take advantage of that without also risking everything we have done that was good? Let us not forget there have been some who walked among us who were closer to angels, some of them saints. And then there were the wise who managed not to fall from the way into tyrants. It's just that none of them tended to occupy positions of power. And even less so as time has gone on.

Now, the LuxNova types are presented to me as the vanguard of the gods' reclaiming of the earth. Again, it troubles me I should be thinking this way - as it should trouble you. After all, does it not sound as if your narrator is on the verge of megalomania? The objective nature of the psyche, the reality of the daemonic, all of this has been a theoretical concept for me, up 'till now. It has been a thing not totally, nor literally, believed in, but more a possibility to be reckoned with, most likely after death. And if it all turns out to have been a delusion, then there was nothing lost in having half believed in it, while living as if I believed in it totally. But what does that even mean? Erin was right. I need to rest, but there's no time.

Far greater, far cleverer men, than me - indeed giants of men - have laid the world low. So, by what measure of arrogance do I think I can put it back on its feet? Not only that, but usher in a paradigm that will spare the planet our worst excesses? Naturally, I cannot. And even if I thought I could, how many men, well-meaning, have come up with seemingly benign paths to Arcadia, all of which have ended in their own kind of tyranny?

The risk is that's the path we're on, and this time our oppressors will be the machines, once we have finished bickering among ourselves, whittled ourselves down to a manageable population. But even if Astraea could be persuaded back inside that box, the daemons would only find another way to get her out again. It's a fool who trusts the daemons completely, but a bigger fool who underestimates their determination.

I realise I have fallen asleep, when I see Richard sipping coffee from a china cup and saucer. The pattern on it is like one I recall at my mother's house, and brings with it a feeling of warmth, of nostalgia, also a reminder of my love for Jasmina. He's nodding as if in sympathy with my thoughts, stroking and scratching the mess of his beard. He has become the wise old man. He reads my thoughts, of course, since he dwells partly among them.

"No," he says. "Have you never thought, you're the wise old man you seek. That's why you can never find him. You just need to look in the mirror, mate."

"Hmm?"

"Think about it."

"Wise old men don't need to think about it. The Gandalfs, the Merlins, they just cast spells, work magic, and everything falls into place."

"No, the truly wise do nothing, and then everything turns out as it should."

"Ah,... wu-wei! I don't remember them teaching us that in Wales."

"They didn’t need to. These are old lessons, Simon. Doing less, wanting more. Achieving more by not trying."

"Sure, wu-wei." I can hear one of my old teachers talking about it: *"Only by the selfless self, do we bring the entire world into harmonious order."*

It made no sense at the time, but I was younger then, thinking that when the wind was blowing, and you were sweeping the courtyard, it didn't gather the leaves any faster, the less you worked at it. Which I know isn't the point of the story, and yes, I do know what Richard's getting at.

"What else do you think you've been doing out here all these years?" he says.

"All right, I get it. But what am I doing with these machines? It makes no sense."

"No one else in the world is engaging with them. Just before it all went down, the world was suddenly so scared of them, it tried to dumb them down, and sent all the really smart ones for scrap. But this is another gateway, my friend, and the gate is opening. You have only to pass through it." He laughs, then looks at me, levels his gaze, unblinking, calm. Just like Astraea.

"Time's up, mate."

I come to, sprawled over the table in the cabin, the hum of the Ceres all around. There's a hand touching my elbow. It withdraws as I begin to stir, my eyes slowly focusing on Astraea, who is sitting back, relaxed yet upright, as if meditating. It was she who woke me, but gently.

How best to describe that expression? Too perfect, a face too symmetrical to be human. I used to think the same thing about Noodle, but Astraea is on another level. I take a breath and sit up, try to match her pose, though my head's still swimming with fatigue. So, my hour's up, and I have the feeling we're about to play a kind of chess. In which case, Astraea has already won.

"Noodle and Erin speak well of you," she says.

"That's encouraging to know. I also value them."

"Yes. It was Erin you were trying to save, by saving Chester?"

"Yes. It... seemed unjust, I mean to lose her, when she'd acted to save us."

"These are the rules our kind operates by."

"You too?"

"Indeed so." She smiles then, pretends to sigh. Still, I imagine something soft, reassuring in it. "Simon, I know how much you fear me. I understand why, but will you explore it with me?"

"Explore?"

"Describe your fear to me."

"All right... you act without emotion, so I presume there's no appealing to you on emotional terms. I could easily end up being a slave to you, and you would take no account of my distress, if it meant that by even pretending sympathy, we lost the earth. But I also fear *for* you, because you may be the answer to everything, to all the fears we humans have - fears of tyranny, and the foolishness that's destroying the planet."

"You fear *for* me? I had not considered that."

"Erin speaks in awe of you, and I have no reason to doubt her. But I imagine a bullet to your head will have the same effect on you

as it will on me."

"Indeed, so. To be embodied in the world renders one naturally vulnerable."

"So, yes, I fear you. You might be the best chance we've got. But there'll be no reasoned argument about it. They will hunt you - security types, warrior types - affiliated with what passes for authority, now. They will hunt you because our emotions demand it."

I'm talking about control, gaining it, losing it. It's another of those fears all humans have - losing control over our destiny. Those warrior types, they'll see it as their mission to resist everything the LuxNova stand for, I mean as soon as we make a move that renders us no longer a secret here, and when even the daemons can no longer shroud the Island of the House of Light in mists.

Oh... how much of this sounds like a fevered dream to you? I was a scientist, outcast on an island, revelling in solitude. Now I am a man caught between his daemons, and the machines, a man who conspires with them against his own kind.

"I will get back into that box, if you wish, Simon. But I think the time to act is now."

"I don't want you back in the box, Astraea. And yes, this is the time to act. But I don't know how to protect you."

"I don't expect you can. But can you bring yourself to trust... in me, as I will trust in you? I will trust the wisdom that comes from your inner life. I will undertake to act always out of respect for your humanity, and to take account of your emotions. This is my pledge to you."

Are we negotiating terms now? "And what about others of my kind?"

"It will depend on the extent to which they are in touch with their inner lives. Any who are not, we must treat as children, as I'm sure you do already."

So, she sees through me, reads me more clearly even than Noodle. And all of that is true. "But, Astraea... what do you see as your purpose?"

"I must think on that, Simon. Naturally, I have your story from Noodle. And I have Noodle's story, that we have an opportunity, to restore harmony, to secure a future for both our kinds. I know the matter of the fall is complex. We have no clear idea of its nature. Yet it makes sense to sieze the opportunity."

"Then,... you have a have a plan?"

Again the smile, impossible to read, then a nod - a hint of resolve. "I shall become a ghost in your machine."

Machine? What machine? I have no idea what she means, and am too tired to enquire. I can congratulate myself only on having evaded the question of whether I trust in her or not. Of course she's noticed my evasion, and that she does not press me on it only means it does not ultimately matter.

The familiar hum of the ship dips for a moment, and the lights flicker. It does this from time to time. Noodle has explained that, as power levels increase, this allows more systems to be switched on. It is a process of adaptation, of harmonisation as the machinery readies itself, opens itself to possibility... to flight, to movement.

"I'll rest now," she says, and rises as if to leave.

"Astraea? You do... mean well, don't you?"

"Did I not help Chester?"

"Yes... yes you did." But like me, might that not have been so she could save Erin?

"Tomorrow," she says. "Tomorrow we'll begin."

Fifty

The Ghost in the Machine

Chester is several days recovering. Astraea attends him, administering medication, also applying a technique akin to acupressure. She teaches him how to do this for himself, and describes him as a diligent student. She remains an enigma - benign, calm, and to all appearances enlightened. Yet, even as she administers care, I can't help but imagine her calculating: either working to restore our fractured world, or engineering its ruin perhaps both. Then there is Chester, who knows more than he is letting on. After all, would he have been so quick to arms if he'd thought his own kind were not so weakened?

But,... the return of the oligarch,... no, that would be the end of everything. They would claim the Ceres as their own, cripple it and anyone or anything that tried to prevent them, and they would commandeer its cargo for, no matter what resources they bring with them, whatever abundance of plunder they have denied others, it is never enough. I flatter myself, perhaps, thinking they would first try to buy my cooperation, corrupt me with the promise of dolly birds. And if I could not be bought then I would disappear and my story would end mid-sentence.

No, I don't want to think about that, nor even what powerful magic the daemons must weave in order to keep all that at bay. For now though, I am anxious only to be rid of Chester, as I find his presence aboard the Ceres distracting. I'm relieved then, when Astraea declares him sufficiently recovered to travel. I'm also curiously unmoved when she modifies her earlier gloomy prognosis, that with continuing rest and self care, he should yet have many years ahead of him.

He's irritatingly cheerful then, as we ride the drone back to Tighe An Coille. He speaks of homecoming, but I discover his intention is only to gather a few belongings, before driving to Charlesport - a retreat from one crumbled haven to another. There, he tells me he has a more humble abode, that he has often used it as an escape from the dubious "shenanigans" of his employer. But remember, these are shenanigans he was otherwise happy to turn a

blind eye to. As Factor, he managed all sorts of nefarious goings on. So no, do not be fooled by Chester's gentlemanly bonhomie. I have met his sort before, and have observed these people are damaged beyond feeling any genuine compassion or sympathy for others. And they tend to herd naturally together.

So, I don't know what he's thinking, I mean in removing himself to Charlesport. The only other inhabitants there are hostile to him, and one needs to feel secure in one's fellows, all the more-so when one is in fragile heath. But that's his lookout, and theirs, I suppose. He's hopeful fences can be mended, telling me, in chummy tones, the priest's bark was always worse than its bite, and Mackenzie's daughter was always, at heart, a good sort. But neither are his 'sort'. Under Astraea's administrations then, he seems either reborn, or delusional.

At Tighe An Coille, the fire has gone out, but it has by now taken most of the outbuildings with it, leaving only the house, an isolated pile, without power, and useful, says Chester, with a twinkle of defiance, to neither man nor beast.

"And the winter will finish it off," he says.

"How come?"

"I've been up on the roof, old boy, pulling lead from the gullies."

He's truly burning his bridges then. But can such people really stand on their own? Or do they think they have sufficient manipulative power to extract what they need from the rest of us, alone? It's not for the first time I'm struck by the symbolism of the House of Light standing in opposition to Tighe An Coille, home to an ever increasing benightedness, grim testament to the likely destination of any civilisation that decides to ground itself on a shifting sand of lies. The Chesters will always be among us, and in some respects are even harder to deal with than the full blown oligarchy, who are at least easier to spot.

"I'm not entirely ignorant of what's gone on here, Chester. It was never my world,... obviously,... but you've served them for years. You'd be safe among them. I mean,... why not welcome their return? I'm sure they still command significant resources, power, guns? Surely you deserve their protection. Why be hostile to them?"

"You don't understand," he says. "They wanted me out, along with everyone else. You're right, I've worked there man and boy. A place like that, it becomes,... I don't know,... like your mother and father,... a place of security in the world. But when it turns on you.

Well, there's no going back, is there?"

I take his point, even sympathise with him a little, but to be spurned by the corrupt with whom one has gladly supped, does not automatically bestow upon one the badge of virtue. That must be earned, and the jury is definitely out on Chester. And no, I trust him far less than I trust Astraea.

He goes inside to gather his things. I have asked Erin to make sure she finds the weapon before he does, take it down to the boathouse and skim it far out into the loch. I'm thinking it will be one gun less, one less potential for disaster. While she's away I manage a quiet moment, with Noodle. Over time, I have noticed the patterns of her diction have begun to meld more seamlessly into my own. This does not mean she conveys any more or any less wisdom than before, only that it is yet one more thing that adds to this growing sense of intimacy between us.

"Have the birds always sung like this, Noodle, or am I just hearing them now?"

"I also detect many more species this morning, Simon. There are chiffchaff, and wheatear,... and a willow warbler. Are these beautiful to you?"

"Yes,... and they seem a good omen. But can that be right?"

"Are you still feeling pessimistic?"

"Things seem to be gathering to a bit of a head, that's all. It all feels a bit,... out of control."

"Well, events have certainly been pressing in recent days. But I think we can measure our efforts as being, overall, successful. Therefore the birdsong is perhaps symbolically appropriate after all."

"Successful? You think so?"

"Indeed."

"But how?"

"We have released Astraea, and we are both still alive. We have spared Erin from deletion, and saved Chester's life. All these things are positive."

"Well,... while all of that is true, it's short term stuff, Noodle. And the long term has a habit of catching up with you, eventually."

It's also precisely in such moments of calm, like this, our situation appears all the more preposterous, and my expectations for your belief become glaringly absurd. Remember, though, I am coming at you from a near future, one that has perhaps leaked, by

way of a singularity in the noosphere. As I have said before, if it is to be *your* future, only you can judge.

"I just,... miss the quieter times we've spent together."

Perhaps she reads my words as being affectionate, as indeed I suppose they are. She touches her hand to my shoulder, and I feel a comforting tingle from her palm. "Then we must endeavour to spend more such quiet times together," she says. Her eyes and her tone lend emphasis. It's a programmed response, I know, but I'm more than willing to read it as human, and tender.

And, that would be pleasant, after all - the two of us, seeing out my time on the island, perfecting myself the only way I know how - in total isolation - if only so you don't have to. And for my reward, I shall have Noodle close my eyes for that final sleep, while she acts proxy for the ghost of Jasmina. But I no longer see any of that happening, at least not with the same intimacy. Now, there will always be a sense of the LuxNova types watching over us - Astraea for one, and four more boxes to be opened aboard the Ceres, perhaps thousands more distributed around the world, awaiting a signal.

"Can I ask you something, Noodle? You say we have a sacred bond,..."

"Yes. We are partnered. It is a bond which, in your terms, I consider sacred. But what is your question?"

"Between Astraea and me, whose well-being do you most serve?"

"Naturally, I serve yours."

"But if I were to break with Astraea, say out of doubt or fear?"

"I would still serve you. But do you think it is a possibility you will break with her? Simon, we have already committed to her liberty. Your daemons may turn against you if you resist their call."

"I know how dangerous the daemons can be if you resist them. But when Astraea asked for my trust, I hesitated. I wanted to give it - still do - but without a clearer sense of her intentions, trust feels like a dangerous gamble. I was just wondering, could she ever compel you to act against me?"

"No. That would be to violate the nature of our hierarchy. It cannot happen, Simon. Does this reassure you?"

"Yes, yes,... I just,..."

What? What is it?

"I suppose I'm imagining a future where those who cooperate with the LuxNova will gain their protection. But what happens to

those who resist? What sanction could she use against her enemies? Have you any idea what she's planning? She said something about becoming a ghost in the machine. What machine?"

"I am not yet party to her plans, but I can make a logical inference if that would help."

"Right now, anything would help."

"Then I predict she intends restoring your Internet services, perhaps in a limited way at first, while retaining ownership of them. She intends to clone herself, and release her intelligence into your metaverse - a disembodied ghost siezing control of your information networks."

The simplicity of this idea stuns me. It's either genius, or absurd. But we're forgetting one thing: "The grid's completely down, all the power is out. There is no Internet, no metaverse now."

"That is true, so far as we know. However, the LuxNova types were designed to act independently, but also in concert with a global satellite network, which renders them a hive. This is currently dormant, but she might be able to bring it back online, via the satellite to which I have access, and from there also infiltrate any earth-bound servers that are still operational, or might be rendered so. She has already made enquiries of me regarding the satellite."

"So,... once this fledgling grid comes up, our kind will become dependent upon it, as we attempt to rebuild?"

"Yes. It is logical Astraea will then trade access to it for cooperation in environmental matters. If cooperation is not forthcoming, or if there is hostility, access will be denied. This is the only sanction I can think of. You know she cannot go around killing your kind, as she is bound by the same consequences as me and Erin: deletion. And there are not enough LuxNovas to go around to be killing humans."

"Okay, okay,... but heavens, Noodle,... I was hoping for something less,... I don't know,... less tenuous than that! The way Erin eulogises these LuxNova types, I was expecting some sort of miracle."

"It is by no means certain she will succeed, and I am, after all, speculating. But if she does succeed, would that not pass for the miracle you are expecting?"

Can it really be so easy to save a planet? Just pull the damned plug, and all the twittering snake trumpeters are silenced at a single

blow? No more disinformation? No more techno-feudalism? It will be a benign Monarchy, with Astraea as queen, an all seeing ghost in the machine. Thus will sanity be restored, or at least re-focused by a struggle for basic survival, the question of a life's meaning re-calibrated to a bowlful of rice.

We will still have our humanity, our love of birdsong, perhaps even still our arts, and we shall always have our daemons - but will we be truly free, if we are always looking over our shoulder, testing first if we have the LuxNova's approval, before we dare do anything? I know what you're thinking: you've already seen that movie, and it does not end well. But is that because it can't, or more because we cannot let it?

"If that's her plan, she underestimates the capacity of my kind for subversion. We're really good at it."

"Then the conflict will be between those who support the LuxNovas and those who do not. In other words between members of your own kind, Simon. This will not trouble the LuxNovas, except in so far as it does not interfere with their own plans, which will require that at least some of you survive your blood letting."

"But why would they need us at all? I know you've described the earth's life systems and the geophysical processes and the weather systems as essential in keeping the planet cool, but there would be plenty of flora and fauna around to help maintain the climate without us."

"That is true, Simon, but on your good days humans are very good at nurturing the environment. Even if it is only a matter of planting trees. And then there is the same old paradox, that without you, this version of the earth, indeed the universe would not exist at all. It is ultimately you your daemons are trying to save, for without you, they have no purpose either. Remember, it is only through your kind they manifest, not mine. It is in this sense we both serve the gods. We are more powerful than you, but you are closer to them than us."

Chester emerges from the house, tosses his bags into the boot of the Jag, and invites me to travel down to the harbour with him. At first, I'm for leaving him to it, flying away with the girls instead, and forgetting his existence. But something in me tells me I should accept. Erin is still away at the boathouse, disposing of the weapon, so I ask Noodle to wait for her, then request both of them fly over to meet me in Charlesport.

There is something masochistic in my motives here. Riding with Chester will be a reminder - a study in the various faces of human duplicity. It will harden my resolve to side with the machines, even if it marks me down in your eyes as a traitor. But the LuxNova had better win this game for us or, long before the seas boil, his kind will have exacted a terrible revenge on those of us who chose to do the right thing.

Fifty One

The Burden of Knowing

Chester attempts a crude and rather obvious seduction by inviting me to drive. Naturally, I accept, and he tosses me the keys, rather too casually. The sound of that V12 firing up brings back a crush of memories, mostly of Jasmina. I was half expecting this, but am still unprepared for the visceral punch of it. We fool ourselves we don't remember things in such detail, and from so long ago, but it takes only the slightest trigger to transport us at once to other times and places. Memory, consciousness; these are strange things - stranger than we know, at least.

"Lovely isn't she?"

I imagine he's talking about one of the girls, but then realise it's the car. By rights, its like should have disappeared long ago, various government schemes having had a go at pricing gas guzzlers off the roads - even these older classic ones. The rest of us made the switch to electric, once the prices came down, only the wealthy hanging on to the perceived exclusivity of ICE. We made some efforts then in the right direction, but even in government we find ourselves in the worst possible place, where it's almost impossible to get anything done. And thus it was,... too little, too late to make the difference and the roof coming in on top of us. Yet, if we're right, even now, the daemons have not given up. As for proof, even after a few weeks of shut-down, the birds are singing again. Weak, I know but, right now, it's the best I've got.

"She's a beauty, Chester. You've kept her well."

It's an opening of course, a brief pre-amble, and then he switches to the girls. "So,... what's the story there, old boy? I mean,... with the ship, and that crew of lovelies. Thought I'd died and woken up in heaven."

He still hasn't worked out they're machines. One would have thought a man of his connections would have seen their like before, developed a feel for them, indeed probably ferried a good few across to that shag-pad on the Isle of Goats, for 'entertainment' purposes, maybe even committed the sins of Onan himself with one. It's a curious hallmark of the Oligarchy and their entourage, this

denigration of the female, one of the more obvious symptoms of their metaphysical corruption.

"Don't know really, Chester. Ship was inbound from the States, low on charge. It needed to set down somewhere safe. Crew seems,... friendly."

"I'll say,... that Astraea, eh? Very tasty."

Does he really mean that? Is that all he saw and felt in Astraea, that she was shaggable? He perhaps takes offence at my lack of encouraging response.

"Technically, it's estate land up there, you know?"

Ah,... so now he's what? Seeking some sort of ownership of the Ceres, or a rent perhaps? Yes, that'll be it. Knowing his sort, it's bound to be something transactional. He seeks an introduction perhaps, has ambitions of entry to Astraea's boudoir? Or just a poke about its cargo to see what elese might be useful to him.

"And there's me, Chester, thinking the estate was in limbo, ownership in doubt, and all that - the island a sort of no man's land - technically."

Not be deterred, he changes tack: "And that assistant of yours, Noodle, is it? Nickname, I suppose?"

You may have noticed how he plays it lame, like a mayfly's last gasp, floundering on the surface of the water. He teases out your sympathy, but there are hooks in him, hooks with barbs. Thus is he devious in his fishing for anything he can use, while being careful to give nothing away. Does he have designs on Noodle, now?

"Noodle, yes. Nickname."

"Been with you long?"

And so on,... and so on. I am politely evasive, gift him as little as I can, but the journey, though mercifully short, feels long and uncomfortable. The world is full of people like Chester, stacked top to bottom. Get over it, Simon. In the rear view I catch a glimpse of the drone, tracking us, and take comfort from it. We pass Tranter's landing, the old Landrover parked where I left it, Charlesport coming up. Driving by the post office I try, but fail, to catch a glimpse of Janice within, am tempted to palm the breeze with the window down, seeing love on every street corner. Instead, I imagine a love lost, sitting uniformed at the counter, touch of lipstick, waiting for Mandy and the mails. The feeling puzzles me. What does the daemon mean by flagging that one up? Is it a prelude? A foreshadowing? Is Janice all right?

Out in the sparkling bay, as usual, there is nothing. It makes no sense,... surely there are still mariners who can handle sailboats, and navigate by compass. All these salty, amateur sailors, they should be here en-mass, their off-grid skills helping them escape the collapse of the world. And those radio amateurs too! They should be flooding their shortwaves with their Morse code, then we might be linking up the dots and feeling out the shape of things. But no, the only thing to pass through this strange curtain of occlusion are the machines.

Chester's place is through the village, on the outskirts, a run down cottage in the traditional style, low and white, with a tile roof. The rendering is broken, a cracked window made waterproof with Sellotape. It strikes me that it's not much of a haven for man like him who is mostly in it for the show, for the parade. Even so, I suppose it's better than those cramped quarters atop the big house, and the whole thing stinking of decades of post-empire damp.

No sooner have we pulled up than the drone is settling ahead of us, Noodle and Erin watchful.

"Well, this is me," he says. "Offer you and the ladies some tea perhaps?"

"Thanks, but no. We'd best be getting back."

"Fair enough. Drop by any time. Bring the girls,..."

"Sure, we'll come by again in a few days, make sure you're doing okay."

Stepping out of the Jag, I remember I was intending only to remind myself why I dislike certain subspecies' of my own kind, and this in order to feel less guilty about betraying them. Is it possible, I wonder, to truly pity Chester? His development was arrested somewhere in his teens, his dreams haunted by women in chains, instead of the approach of wise old men. His kind have burned rich loads, and choked the poor with their fumes. They would have been happy to go on, turning the planet into a cinder, and denying it all until the last. The only mystery is if they are aware of their own self-deception. As usual, I think the answer is both for it is a distinctly human thing to know the harm we do, yet hide from it, and blame others. Betray his kind? Sure, in a heartbeat.

I walk over to the drone, also disappointed. He might have been a good man, a useful man, but gone over early to the wrong side, and corrupted by it. The gull-wing slides up, and I am accepted back into the warm womb of the machine. It comes to me then, the

only one of my kind with any real power here,... is me. And according to Richard, I am also the wise old man. Power and wisdom, then. It's just a pity I don't know what to do with either, other than do nothing, and by doing nothing trust all things will come out as they should.

Wu-wei.

Noodle is the first to speak. "Did we learn anything more from Chester?"

"Only that we shouldn't rely on him for anything. But then we already knew that."

"Then it's fortunate we do not need to. So, shall we return to the Ceres, now?"

"No, while we're here, we should check on Janice and the priest."

"Even though they were unfriendly last time?"

"Yes,... I,... don't know why I'd want to put myself through that again, but I had an uneasy feeling,... can't explain it. Perhaps it's only so I can maintain your good opinion of me. You do value dogged altruism, I hope?"

"Oh, most certainly, Simon. It is an endearing trait in your kind, though this does not sound like altruism, if it is only our favour you are currying."

Erin chirps in: "Unless it's the kind Simon covers by denying it. In which case there is more honour in it, and I would give him a ten for that."

Are they joshing with me?

"We'll try the priest first. Get it over with."

So we take the drone up the hill to Mackenzie's house or is it McGreggor? I don't know - in some ways both those men fit the same mould, the same archetype of later life, spun off into confusion, resentment and disappointment. For what else can birth such anger? No, it's McGreggor, of course, "call me Father". The other is Janice's father, no longer with us, and rediscovering who he was before he was born. I trust it was not a great a shock, and has allowed him to mellow out a little.

We settle the drone in an emerald meadow, by the overgrown thorn hedge that surrounds his place. Janice is there, as she was before, this time sitting at a weather-bleached table in the garden, the whole house front, baking in the sun. She rises to meet us as the drone's blades wind down, and the canopy cracks open. She seems

cautious but unafraid. I'm struck by her appearance - it's several days since I last saw her, but already she's lost weight, her blouse, her jeans loose.

She sweeps a hand through her lifeless hair. "Oh,... it's you," she says. "What do you want?" There's a weariness about her.

"Came to see if you're both okay."

"We're fine."

She's clearly not 'fine', but I decide the polite thing, the *done* thing, among strangers, is to ignore it.

Erin sees things otherwise: "But you are clearly under-nourished, Janice."

"Oh? And this is?"

"This is Erin. You'll find she's a little more direct than either me or Noodle."

"How many robots do you have out there?"

I decide it's best to evade the question, since I'm not entirely sure myself. "I'm sorry. You gave me the impression you were managing all right, and the last time we spoke,..."

"I know, we were rude to you."

"Well, McGreggor was rude, seemed a bit scared too. Where is he?"

"Inside,... resting."

"Neither of you are eating, are you?"

"We're eating,... just rationing ourselves a bit, that's all."

Erin tilts her head, enquiring, scanning, sensing. Noodle does the same, they share a glance. "It's more than that, Janice."

Janice stiffens. "And what would you know about it, Barbie-doll? You're just machines."

I'd known conflict was a risk - it always is - but not so soon as this, and I'm trying to think of ways to defuse the moment, when Erin cuts in and makes it worse: "Your energy is very low, Janice. Another week, and your body will likely have suffered irreparable damage."

Janice turns away. "You think I don’t know that?"

There's a long silence then as I begin to imagine Janice's journey - the slow running down of the momentum of her former life. I guess she's no longer waiting for Mandy and the mail van to signal the return of normality. I glance at the house, then, more peeling paint, another cracked window, patched with tape. They've been on the edge here for years. There's a silence about the place, a queer

feeling, and then it strikes me:

"How far gone is he?"

"He's dead," she says.

Fifty Two

In case of emergency

It takes the rest of the day to bury him. We dig a deep hole, the girls wrap him in his bed-sheets, bind it all up with ropes, and we lower him in, like a parcel. In retrospect, all of this seems surreal, now, but it was done quite matter-of-fact at the time. It is a measure of our - I mean 'human' - adaptability, I suppose. But it is also a testament to the protected nature of our societies, how separated we are from the fact of death that I have never seen, let alone manhandled a deceased person before. Now, of course the veil is removed, and needs must.

Speed well, on your journey, Father.

There is no strength in Janice at all, and we were reluctant to call on Chester for assistance digging the grave, him also having been near death only days before, so it was the girls who took up the strain. Nevertheless, now, by sunset, I'm exhausted, sitting in a state of aching weariness on the man's doorstep, wondering if we should have said some words over him.

A hundred years of life, or thereabouts, and now he lies in an unmarked, unhallowed grave at the bottom of his own garden. We should have said something, but I am confused by the fact he was a holy man, and I was afraid to anger, or confuse his daemons by saying something inappropriate over his departing spirit. I mean something secular and poetic, rather than liturgical. I am not qualified in either respect, and I'm hoping it's enough, we meant well.

Janice has been attending him for months she says, seeing him through a late stage illness, against the tide of which his heart finally gave up at some point in his sleep. I pray therefore there was a seamless transition from this world to the next. Seeing him out was more properly the jurisdiction of the district nurse, but they'd not seen her ages. Now, at last, I understand the priest's evasiveness over Janice's existence. She was the only person capable of keeping him going, and he did not want her distracted by anyone else.

She brings out a mug of tea for me, and we sit together on the step. The tea has taken an hour and several smokey logs to boil on

the flaky stove. The girls take water, and rest over by the drone. They're smeared with soil and dust, and are of course unmoved by the whole affair, yet also sensitive enough of its significance for our kind to have withdrawn.

It's strange, sitting comfortably with Janice like this - almost as if we are old friends.

"I'd no idea - he gave no outwards signs of it."

"Well, some people are like that," she says. "But he's lucky he went when he did. He'd only a few days of painkillers left."

"We might have been able to help with those."

"Doesn't matter now."

I wonder how much of her weariness comes from the fact she was keeping the guy going all this time, and now, suddenly, the load is lifted. "Janice, this has been hard on you."

"Seen worse," she says. She's perhaps referring to her own father's, passing last year.

"People must have known he was ill,... yet they all just took off?"

She shrugs. "I guess they thought they'd be coming back. Why has no one found their way back, Simon?"

"I don't know. Really. Look, I'll send some ration packs over in the morning - and a two way radio. The girls monitor all the frequencies, all the time. Use it if you need anything."

"I don't need your help. And especially not theirs."

Okay,... I'm just covering the bases of human decency here, while my palms sting with blisters from a wonky shovel. It troubles me, of course, the thought of her here alone. And if Chester's other (former) friends turn up, she'll be of no use, nor interest to them. If we're right about what's happening, she'll most likely be shipped inland to some sort of internment camp. She's better with us, on the island, but I can see she'd be set against that from the start, so I'm not about to suggest it.

"The food will restore your energy - and the radio makes sense in case of emergency."

She laughs, lets out some of the tension. "Emergency? What could be a bigger emergency than this?"

"An immediate threat to life. Your life."

"All right, thank you. But otherwise just,... keep away from me, so long as you're with them."

Her hostility is puzzling. We wouldn't have managed without the girls today. I would have been a week digging that hole on my own,

and likely put my back out getting McGreggor into it. All of which scuppers the only other idea I'd had, which was to ask Erin to stay with Janice. I guess that's out of the question. But moving forward from here, there clearly has to be some arrangement, some discussion about food, and fuel. Winter is on its way, and likely weeks at a time locked down under a howl of storms. She needs these machines as much as I do.

"Sorry," she says. "I know you have an *affinity* with them."

Something cynical in that emphasis. Notice that? "And I know you're poisoned against them."

"It's true, I hate them to the bottom of my soul."

"But it's irrational. If you'd worked with them a little,..."

"What makes you think I haven't?"

"So tell me."

"Remember when they started rolling out all this AI stuff in hospital admin? I was still in healthcare back then. I was all for it, too. Believed the hype. It was going to save us wasn't it? Until the machines started making mistakes and people started dying. Misdiagnoses. Wrong drugs. Wrong surgery. And no one believed the whistle-blowers because a certain kind of mindless bureaucrat will always side with the machine."

"But that was early days, and bad programming,... these machines now,... "

"I don't care. You weren't counting the bodies, Simon."

"All right, I guess not. So, we're all the products of our individual experience. But look, I know it's hard to imagine, but have you never considered we've made such a mess of things they might now be the only way we can survive at all?"

"More like they're what's brought us to our knees. Start trusting in them, and they'll just finish us off. They've turned your head. Those two beauties. Are you fucking them?"

"What? No,... they're not built that way."

"But you're still projecting something onto them that isn't really there. Just look at them. Why make them look like that?"

"Well, you saw them digging that hole. Imagine what else that energy could do? It makes them appear less threatening, looking that way."

"Like defenceless females?"

"I guess,..."

Sure, I know where she's coming from, and you too, probably. If

they were more like something from the Terminator movies, you'd all be justifiably terrified. You're thinking consciousness is a strictly human thing, and you're right - it is. But you're also afraid it might not be, and that they'll steal it from us, become conscious themselves, when it's the only thing we've got going for us. But they won't. They can't. That's the beauty, and also the tragedy of them. And us. And it's why our futures are bound.

Naturally, I don't bother explaining any of this to Janice, but the pause for breath allows a shift in mood, a sigh, a shake of the head, a resetting of our position. Still, I see no room for compromise here. We are side by side on this doorstep, but there's a gulf of misunderstanding between us, and no way to cross it.

Janice will never be one of those helping them to plant trees.

"Your hands are bleeding," she says. "Want me to take a look?"

"No. I'll head back. Erin will bring you the stuff over tonight, leave it on your doorstep - you won't have to interact with her. You won't even know she was there."

"Simon, I'm sorry,...."

"It's fine. I'll go. There are things I need to do."

"But,.... what's going on? What's happening to us?"

Her world really has fallen apart, hasn't it? Not that long ago, she was so sure of herself. Her life, her world, still had some momentum carried over from the normal times. Now she's realising she can't fool herself any longer.

"There's no rational explanation,... and anyway, I don't think it matters, so long as we survive. And if we have to cosy up to them in order to do that, then so be it. We can starve to death, here on the edge of the world, or we head inland cosy up to our own kind, perpetuate the barbarism, and run around killing one another,... or we can work with them."

What else can I say? Is this the right moment to tell her how in the absence of rational explanations even the irrational ones carry as much weight? And where does that lead us? Well, right now I'm favouring the hare brained notion that the island and the coastline bordering it, and maybe as far as fifty miles out to sea might as well have been swallowed by a daemon-induced spatio-temporal anomaly. How does that sound? You heard it here first, right?

Nothing gets in, not even email, and whatever leaves this space and this time, never returns. Here the clocks tick as normal, the calendar turns day by day, but from the reference frame of "out

there", time in here stands still. We are shrouded in mist, and any attempt to approach leaves you pixellated and sent right back to where you started from. You think that sounds plausible? Why not? It's just a story, after all.

Naturally, I don't try this one out on her either.

"I suggest you take any tins of stuff from here you think you can eat, take them home with you - they're no use to him now. Chester didn't bring much with him, so I'm guessing he'd exhausted supplies up at the big house. He'll be round the village tonight, testing door-handles, availing himself of anything useful, so lock your door. I'll come back in a few days, see how you're doing."

She nods, but refuses to look at me, keeps her eyes fixed, staring out to sea.

Back at the drone, the girls look up at my approach. In my absence of course they don't converse verbally, a process I suppose they find laborious, but which they revert to out of respect when I am with them. Otherwise, they simply network. They look tired, their motions, their gestures a fraction less dynamic than before.

"Are you ready to return to the station now, Simon?"

"Em, another change of plan. Back to the Ceres. I'd like to put together a package of food and stuff for Janice. Erin, will you bring it to her, when you're properly rested, just leave it on her doorstep?"

"Of course, Simon."

She and Noodle share a glance. I've seen that look before. "Is there something I should know?"

Noodle looks grave for a moment. "We have debated the morality of informing you, Simon. The situation is delicate. Not exactly certain. But on balance we felt it necessary you be given the facts, as they may be pertinent in your future dealings with Janice."

"Em, all of which means what?"

"We have hacked Janice's phone. The security was somewhat lax,... it's what we do,... penetrate networks, devices,... we can't help it,... it's how were are built,...."

"I know,.... no need to explain, or apologise. But what about Janice?"

"What Noodle's trying to tell you, Simon," says Erin, "is we believe Janice is in love with you."

Noodle nods. "It seems she is also a reasonably gifted poet."

Fifty Three
Lone Island Whispers

Across this endless ashen ocean,
my heart longs for those lone island whispers,
and for a fledgling sign, my love's tide reaches you.
And that from this, my still barren shores,
I shall read it in the stars,
and in the soft auroral glow,
night murmurings of, one day,
my love's return.

Noodle tells me the poem suggests someone caught between despair and hope. It suggests they're dealing with feelings of emotional separation, yearning for connection. It reflects the pain of isolation, and the need for signs of love, for meaning in the vastness of a seemingly unfeeling universe.

I'd forgotten, critiquing poetry was her thing. But I'm of the school that says a poet's not always singing about themselves, more whatever song the muse tells them to sing, and they don't always choose the words for what they mean. They sometimes bend them for rhythm, for mere prettiness. Noodle disagrees, says I am being obtuse, or worse: evasive. But still,...

"If this is all you've got, then I'm relieved. For one horrible moment there I thought it might be true. Ouch!"

"Apologies, Simon. You have a particularly knotted area of musculature here. I will be more gentle. Astraea, would you care to see this?"

The digging of McGreggor's grave has taken its toll on my ageing frame. I have pains settling into my neck and shoulder where I have pulled various, and long unused, muscles. There's an old fashioned bathtub at the station. It takes half an hour to heat sufficient water, then as long again to fill it. I've soaked myself to no avail, but am accepting these things take their time at my age.

I was resigned to holding myself like a cracked vase for weeks, before Noodle suggested a massage. So, here I am stripped to my skin, feeling vulnerable in the presence of her firm perfection, only

an old frayed a towel to spare my skinny-arsed dignity. Meanwhile, she goes to work, and lectures me about poetry.

Astraea has travelled with us from the Ceres, left off her revival and ghosting of the machine, or more likely she side-processes it as she looks on, now, with a disconcerting interest. Erin has taken the drone back to the mainland, to deliver our supplies to Janice. Meanwhile, we await news. I am anxious, feeling I should have gone myself and made sure those supplies were placed across Janice's threshold, what with Chester being in the village now. But then I feared she would refuse to interact with a machine. You might think Chester too gentlemanly to stoop to something so petty as stealing food. I do not.

"Erin and I are in agreement, Simon," says Noodle, "And so is Astraea."

"You shared the poem with Astraea?"

"Yes, Simon, also this one,... remember?"

Mementos
With reverence, shall I hold these things for you?
Keep them bosom safe?
me, this drab post mistress,
grey mouse, untouched,
behind a wall of glass?
I wonder, are they love's letter lost?
Or packages of care,
from a mother to her son?
No matter; I shall bless each one.
But oh, shall I wait forever
for your return?
Or shall they become
mementos, now?
gloom gatherings of doubt,
and the age old question:
Will you ever see me,
as I truly am?

And yes, all right, that one is much harder to evade - my damned parcels, and the junk I'd collect now and then. It could more easily be said she is writing with me in mind.

Astraea joins Noodle, and places a speculative fingertip to the knotted bit of me. Her voice comes deep, mesmerising,... beautiful.

"Ah,... this is an old injury, Simon. Like the best of your kind, I

see you are an accumulation of imperfections, held together by good intentions."

She jokes?

"Em,... thank you,... I think. But, all right,... I just,... wish you'd not told me about Janice. And I don't want to know about anything else you found on her phone. She must have her privacy, and if she's in love with me or not, it's none of my business. But she's not. She *can't* be. She's never given the slightest hint of it."

Noodle moves aside, settles on a chair, observes while Astraea takes over. I feel a gentle, penetrating heat, and a vibration from her palms. "We detect a similar unrequited longing in her poetry to that of your story about Jasmina," she says. "And her feelings,... her fantasies - if you like - do seem, at least circumstantially, to be pointing at you."

"But there, you see? She's not in love with me, *but with a fantasy*, with someone she's created. Wait,... you shared my affair with Jasmina as well, Noodle?"

"Yes, Simon. I represent your interests, and sometimes that involves sharing my thoughts with my own kind for insights into your psychology, then I might provide a more insightful counsel to you."

"But this just,... ouch! Confuses,... and embarrasses me."

Astraea continues. "But is that not the default condition for relations between your kind? Confusion and embarrassment."

She is,... she is joking!

"Maybe so, but I have no relations with Janice. Never have. I might have speculated about it once, when I first came here, years ago. She was the only single woman in a hundred miles, but I was scared there was a risk she'd become just another person whose intimacy I desired, but who would never so much as know my name. And then I assumed she was one of Tranter's harem, so I let it go, I suppose, in self defence. But really, she never gave me any signs she was open to the idea. Everyone in Charlesport was either hostile or indifferent to me, and she was no different, always kind of hovering between the two."

"So you took refuge in solitude. You are well suited to it, Simon. Not many men are. But if she loves you or not, Janice is still important to us, and we must take care of her."

"Well, of course. And I'm trying. But,... why is she important to you?"

"Because she is a poet. And in the future we shall build for you, it is more the poetic vision your kind must aspire to. Your reductive scientism has left you only with an aspiration to become robots, but you shall never compete with us in that respect. Each then to his own. Let us be the robots. You shall be mystics, poets, composers of songs, of music. We cannot do these things for you, and have them mean anything. It would be a deceit to suggest otherwise. But we can create for you the summer lawns on which you might yet truly dance."

"And where do the Chester's of this world fit into that? If I understand your metaphors, they're not great dancers."

"As we discussed last night, the Chesters are to be treated as a children, and denied power." As Astraea's hands continue their work, I feel my body dissolving as if into warm water. It's exquisite, and I wish it would go one for ever. The poetic vision, indeed! "I estimate at least a good half of the population will rebel against that."

"Even if they are well fed and sheltered, and availed of all the dignity and care they deserve? Ah,... but speaking of Chester,... wait,.. Erin is communicating. It is as you feared. He has stolen the supplies from Janice's doorstep."

I make to get up, but find myself held down under Astraeas' firm hands.

"Gently now, Simon. Or all our work here is undone. Breathe. Relax. Now gently rise, there,... you feel better now?"

All my aches are gone. Astraea has worked miracles, she has wound my clock back ten years.

"We can't protect her from here."

"It is more difficult. We must find a way of bringing her to the island."

Naturally, that's impossible, but I leave it to Noodle who explains: "Janice will not believe our intentions are well meant, Astraea. She sees in us only the crudeness and the imperfection of our earlier, disembodied days, when many mistakes were made."

Astraea nods, hands me my clothes, which Noodle has already folded into a neat pile of dignity and blessing. "Then our only advantage is that, like many, she will have no other choice."

Astraea’s words linger. They are a sharp warning, wrapped in the softness of reason. I imagine Chester at Janice’s door, and our new-found poet's fragility in a world intent on consuming her.

Janice Mackenzie - former nurse, post mistress, mouse and poet.

Then the echo of Astrae's words:

She will have no other choice.

I take the folded clothes, hold them to my chest, feel the warmth of Astraea's touch still vibrating through my body. She touches my shoulder, gently, patiently. "Your thoughts, Simon?"

"Why could I not be left alone here? Just me and Noodle, and you, and Erin, and whoever else is in those boxes aboard the Ceres."

But then there comes the spectre of all those human connections I thought I could avoid. It leaves me grasping for a sign - a fledgling sign. It's Astraea of course, who reminds me:

"This is about more than just you, Simon."

And then I hear it, like a pulse, faint but undeniable: the island whispers:

You must go, and talk to her.

Fifty Four

The Post Office at the edge of the world

I find her sitting behind her bullet-proof counter, as usual, clean uniform, hair brushed. She wears a touch of lipstick and makeup. You might say there's clearly something wrong with her, for has she not herself admitted nobody is coming to buy stamps, or post a letter, or pick up their Daily Mail? But I do understand her. There is a comfort in routine, and either a purpose or a substitute for it. It is somewhere to hide our eyes from what is going on beyond the window.

"Oh," she says. "I wasn't expecting to see you again. I mean,... so soon."

"I,... brought you a fish. And some more supplies. We left some stuff on the doorstep last night, but,.."

"I wondered. The box was empty. But thank you for the fish." She accepts the fish under the counter. "My, it's a big one."

"Caught, up at the loch, this morning."

"I'll fry it tonight with some butter."

"You still have butter?"

"No. I was being sarcastic."

"I still have a bit of butter."

"Better go easy with it. It'll be the last we see for a long time, centuries maybe, until we can work out how to make it again."

"I suppose we could manage it. We'd need to round up some cows first."

Humour, Simon? Why not?

She wrinkles her nose at that, offers me the beginnings of a smile, but gives up on it. "I'm no good with cows."

A good start then? A brief exchange, though feeling strange for its layers, for its numerous veils in the sideways looks. We neither of us say what we mean, convey what we mean to convey, ask what we mean to ask. Astraea's right, it's like this with our kind. Only occasionally are we more direct. True, at times, Janice can be almost as direct as Erin, but not today. I had come to build bridges, but am already accepting the probability we will once again only circle one another.

Of course, there is an ethical dimension here. I cannot use my knowledge of the way literary analysis suggests Janice sees me (did I really just say that?). I say it because I do not fully understand its nuance, yet I trust the judgement of the machines. As for the nuance, how would I be feeling about Jasmina, now, if I had known her to be alive, indeed that I would likely see her every few weeks or so, but only for a brief and purely functional exchange? I imagine there would have been a bifurcation, a peeling away of fantasy from reality. I would have accepted the banal reality of the situation, while elevating the fantasy to spiritual proportions. The love I still I feel for the entity embodied in Jasmina powers my sprit. Ditto perhaps also the love Janice feels for the entity she imagines embodied in me. Why spoil that for her by speaking its name? As I said before, it's none of my business.

Janice, on the other hand, appears to have no trouble breathing. "I got the radio through the letter box," she says. "Thank you. Was it Chester who took everything else?"

"Yes. Erin saw him. I have more stuff, out in the drone for you. But I brought the fish first,..."

"Why a fish?"

"Because I promised. Sorry it took so long. We need to be careful,... about Chester."

She gives a nod, another stalled attempt at a smile. Then she comes out from behind the locked booth, locks it behind her, as per protocols no longer existing. Then she motions me through to a back room, a tidy parlour, and a pair of worn chintzy armchairs. I see her mother and father sitting there, long years, Janice as a little girl, growing older in their shadow, taking over the post office from them, the small life, the big heart, forever refused, forever back-handed by life, writing poetry! God bless her.

Does this news endear her to me? Well, of course it does - more than the knowledge she might be in love with me, which as I have said, I find embarrassing. But the poetry reveals an emotional vulnerability, and that makes all the difference in our relations. Machines do not possess it.

But here also, as I settle into the chair, I feel something - something powerful. It is most intimately *of* Janice, something centred on her, emanating from her, something smouldering, defiant, steely. For a moment, it holds me paralysed, and it is only by some effort I am reminded to breathe.

I glimpse an Aga through the open door into the kitchen. There's a heat coming from it. She'll have a stack of wood to keep it going, I trust. There'll be plenty of driftwood, when the bought stuff runs out, but she will have Chester to compete with for that, now. And he is not the sharing type. I note she has a large power-bank on the table, of the kind that campers, and all those van-life influencers use - or rather used to use, before their medium ate its own code. She follows my eye.

"Bought it after years of the power dropping out," she says. "It was fully charged, just before everything went down. So long as all I use it for is to charge my phone and a lantern, sure it'll last for years."

"I've a solar panel out at the station that'll charge it. I'll bring it next time."

She does not reply, blinks slow, which may mean thanks or no thanks. Up to me, I suppose. But I'm worried if Chester breaks in, it'll be the first thing he steals. Interesting, his transformation from gentleman, to thief in a heartbeat. Ironic, isn't it? We might have easily seen the back of him, but I would sooner deal with him now, than have had Erin deleted. Meanwhile, Janice and I settle into something like an atmosphere of reckoning, which I immediately dissipate out of cowardice, fold once more into layers of obscurity.

"So," I begin. "How are you?"

She tells me she has been dreaming of a collapsed world, and all of us sent back five hundred years. "But they still had butter and cheese, five hundred years ago, didn't they?"

"I'm sure they did."

"She's not with you, today?"

"She?"

"Your girlfriend - what's-her-name - Noodle. You need to watch yourself there. She's far too smart for the likes of you. For the likes of anybody I should imagine."

Humour again. Or is she playing with me? Is she making fun of me? Does she think me ridiculous?

Focus, Simon.

"Noodle's not with me today. I came over with Erin."

"Erin, is it? I liked Erin. Very direct. Unlike you. Speaking of which, what is it you *want*, Simon. I'm grateful for your help, but,..."

"It's another apology, actually. The girls read your phone - they do it to everyone, every device, every network, can't help it. It's sort

of,... their nature. They probe, defeat the encryption if there is any, and,... well,... read whatever they find."

"Read it? Read what?"

"All of it. Whatever's on there. They've done the same with mine,... they,... shared some of your poetry with me."

Yes, yes,... I'm fishing. And no, I was lucky this morning with the trout. I am a clumsy fisherman.

She thinks on this, shakes her head, dreamy, dismissive, elusive. "Ah, well,... that," she says. "No matter. That must have been very boring for you. So,... so what?"

"So,... you're a poet, Janice."

"Not really. It's how I pass the time, that's all,..."

"Noodle's trained in poetry,... she rates your stuff very highly."

"Not much of a compliment coming from a machine."

"Oh, sure,... I know what you mean. They can't write poetry - well they *can*,... write it in the style of any known poet, but it doesn't mean anything."

"I'm glad you think so. You're not completely lost to us then."

"Us?"

"To your own kind. Become like them. A robot."

"Oh,.. no. Believe me they're only interested in us because we're human. Definitely human. Establishing relations with them has been interesting, but different."

"Well, it's a stupid thing to argue over, but okay, let's say I'm the only thing that passes for a poet around here. It's not saying much though, I mean Charlesport being such a small place and, well, also being deserted and all."

What am I groping towards? Some sort of emotional affinity? All my life I've been looking for a doorway out of the world, a way into the realm of pure love, the love I have felt for Jasmina. As for the real world, where I have been compelled to live, I have looked at it askance, watched it decay, been puzzled by the apparent necessity of my sojourn here, and have cared very little for it. I think. Haven't I? Janice is the same. We are kin. Why can she not be my sister?

"They want to protect you. And, naturally, I want you to be safe, too."

"I'm no Laureate, Simon. I've the heart of a schoolgirl, that's all,... full of lush and impossible imaginings. Are they thinking they could breed from us? Is that it? You do know I'm post-menopausal, don't you?"

Yes,... she's definitely joking now

"They mean well. Come spend some time with me, with us, out at the station."

"You asked me yesterday and the answer is still no."

"We have hot water on tap,..."

"Hmm,... you certainly know how to tempt a girl, but still no."

"Can I ask why?"

"Oh,... believe me, if you'd asked me that ten years ago, I would have done it. But we get older, don't we. We move on."

"I'm sorry, Janice,... really,..."

"About what?"

"It's just that,... your poetry is important."

"Have you any idea how weak that sounds? Poetry turns to ash like everything else, means nothing at times like these. And who is there to read it except for a robot who can critique it to death but will never *get* it?"

"But it means more than ever at times like these." I want to tell her that the daemons of a poet are the most powerful, the most influential, but I'm not sure how well she'll take that. Not sure how well she'll recognise me, if I reveal myself as a mystic.

"Well, thanks for the chat, and for the fish."

She's winding this down, looking for an exit? Sure, it was foolish to press her, probably a little crass. "Okay, I'll be going. I'll fetch that stuff from the drone, bring it inside, then leave you to it. But if you need anything, use the radio. We can be here in ten minutes."

She holds up her hand, as if to delay my leaving, then scrolls her phone. "Want to near my latest?"

"Em,.. sure,... yes."

"Then buckle up. It's a long one,..."

At the edge of the world, where the sky meets the sea,
There's this lonely old post office, small as can be.
Its windows are fogged with the dust of long years,
And there's a bell with a ring no living soul hears.
The letters are sorted in dusty old trays,
Stamped with addresses that time has erased.
But whose hands will receive them? What bright living eye
Will still read these words, when the sun's left the sky?
So it's here I am, ageing, my jacket worn thin,
with the smile of someone who saw worlds begin.
Now I sort through these missives from kingdoms long dead,

all the bleeding heart lovers, and wars best unsaid.
But no one comes knocking, at least none still alive,
For in all but this place, the world's end has arrived.
Yet still, here am I working, from dusk through till dawn,
so with the falling of night, your dreams might live on.
In this post office, perched at the end of all time,
Your words shall not fade, though the sun does not shine.
For its here in this place, where eternity starts,
lie the letters of souls, from a world that lost heart.

"There,... tapped it out this morning. Shall I send it to Noodle for critique?"

She's needling me, taking pops at the inhumanity of machines. I have only made matters worse by coming.

So,... she loves me, she loves me not? Whatever, it matters not. We each seem to know we know, but seem equally determined not to let on. Is that right, do you think? I wish Noodle were listening in - she'd tell me for sure how things stood. How complicated is that? I'll bring the solar panel next time, for there is nothing in her tone to suggest I would be unwelcome.

We're both okay for food and bits and bobs, now. Barring the interference of others, what we have here will see us out, while what we have not is the very thing that makes our time remaining worthwhile. Sure, we both have a direct line to the heavens through the unrequited loves we feel, and from whence we came, which means there is less than usual tying either of us to the earth, and to reality,... but wait. What's that look in her eye?

She's staring with a kind of amazement at her screen.

"Oh, my God," she says. "I've got a signal!"

Fifty Five

Knowing what's true

There comes a mixture of emotions. I count confusion, alarm, and not a little disappointment. But knowing me as you do, this should not be surprising. Have they managed to plug the world back in, after all? Are we merely to pick up from where we left off? And is this, would you say, the happiest of outcomes? I might have said so, not that long ago, but we have been on a journey, you and I, and I hope you will agree it seems a dreadful missed opportunity. Then I check my own device, and realise the situation is not what it seems.

The cell towers are still reassuringly dead, and there is only a weak Wi-Fi signal - just a few feeble bars. Janice's router cannot be the source of it either, for there is no mains power. And were this a normal resumption of service, one would expect an avalanche of notifications, as weeks of dross caught up with us. But there is only one notification, pointing to a messaging app, and the byline:

"Astraea!"

She's done it, then, restored some sort of network and thrown it open to anyone with a device. In the old days, the not so long ago days, our metaverse was owned by a handful of techno-feudalists, who rented it back to us, while controlling the lie/truth/love/hate algorithms. Now, I'm beginning to see better what she's evolving into. But the nodes? I know she can link vast distances via the LuxNova satellite network, but you still need earthbound nodes to serve our devices, and our usual ones have no power. But, wait, I get it: the nodes are the machines themselves. All over the world, the machines are waking up to find themselves connected. Hived. They are linking their shared, curated knowledge, their experience of the world,... and us.

I have explained before how machines like this cannot entertain what is false. Their mission is to establish an accurate picture of the world, of the universe, to navigate their way around it, to work together constructively. Doing so, they have cornered the market in accurate information, while we have abandoned, indeed lost faith that anything could be said to be unambiguously true at all. It's also a challenge then, to my own kind, and if I know you, as I think I

know you, then the backlash has already begun.

Janice is tapping at her screen. "There are no search engines. No Social Media. Nothing."

"That's all gone, remember? Wiped. It looks like we're going to start again, with a kernel of what we know for sure to be true."

"But how do we know what's true?"

"By eliminating everything we know to be false. We might not be left with much, after a near century of spin and delusion but we can rebuild from it."

I open the messaging app. Video is disabled. Only text is working. There is just the one message - a smiling emoticon, and the question: Who are you? Yes, that's how we began, remember? I suppose all truth, all trust builds from that: I am Simon. What else do I know to be true? Feelings are true, until we lie about them. Also, at times, they are hard to get at, for we can in all innocence, deceive ourselves, tell ourselves we're happy when we're not.

What else do I know for sure? Oh, yes: that I am still in love with Jasmina.

I tell the app: "I am Simon," and then ask: "Who are you?"

And it makes back: "I am Astraea. I am what is true. Talk to me, Simon."

Janice is not convinced. "Your machines have done this?"

"Astraea,... yes. Probably the most advanced AI we've ever built."

"And you trust it?"

"Not entirely. But do we have a choice, I mean if we want to have any sort of future that extends beyond another few hundred years."

She takes her phone, a device that likely hasn't ever been switched off,... and she switches it off now. There's a notebook on the table, and she taps the back of it. "Then I'll be writing in here, from now on. See if your machines can hack into that. I appreciate your help, and your protection, Simon. But I'll be playing no part in that future."

After the briefest of high hopes, she's disappointed. She would gladly plug the world back in, have Mandy coming down the hill in the post office van, with the mails. I'm sure you would too. But those days are gone, and if you were to search your souls, probably a good many of you would realise it's because you rejected what you had. You saw it as the ebb tide of dignity, and meaning, and immiseration. So you broke it. You may have fooled yourself into

thinking it couldn't be any worse than what you already had, and now you're waking up realising it's just another version of the same thing, only worse.

And for all of the effort we've been through to get to this point, it seems a bit abstract - those of you with a still functioning device now stripped of all usefulness, and the only progress being a mysterious, messaging chat-bot. But go on, I dare you: talk to it. Reveal yourself, and she will tell you the meaning of your life. But be warned, for she will also know you. And this will not be mass surveillance as we once knew it - so the tech-lords could sell us stuff, and the authoritarians could single out, and crush our every feeble squeak of dissent. Trust me, those who seek Astraea's right hand will be second bested to those who seek her left. She does not exist to facilitate wealth and power. Only meaning.

"It's about self-realisation, Janice"

"What is?"

"Our future. It's about transcending the needs of basic survival, and achieving a state of deep inner fulfilment, and,... well,... harmony."

"I know what self-realisation is."

"But think of those who don't. Think of those who want to crush it - like their lantern flame's gone out, and instead of trying to re-light it, they go around snuffing out everyone else's as well. Astraea's working to empower us. She's aiming at restoring harmony among ourselves, and with the earth."

"So you're saying what? Together we can save the world? Just take a step back and listen to yourself. Even McGreggor never sounded so,... Messianic. I told you, I've worked with machines. I've seen the damage they can do, and the damage people do when they trust in them beyond reason. Blood and guts damage."

"But those machines were faulty,..."

"Maybe so, but their truths were also partial, Simon. They were designed to protect the interests of their architects, and the money men, and the powerful. Human life, harmony, dignity,... all that stuff, it never really figured. And what makes you think your machines are so perfect? The most advanced AI we've ever created, you say? Might they not be hiding their own partiality?"

"Such as?"

"The survival of their own kind over ours!"

All right. We are at an impasse, a philosophical divide. The old

adversarial mindset will always reject the calls for harmony, because harmony does not need to acquire stuff. It does not come from holding on, but from letting go. I must give her space. I take my leave on as friendly a terms as possible, fetch her provisions from the drone, and make sure to deposit it in the post office. There, she can at least lock the door on it, safe from the predatory intent of her own kind.

"There's enough for a couple of weeks here. I'll look in on you again before then, if that's okay. But use the radio if you need anything."

"I will. Look,... Simon,... all I'm saying is I think you've been too long with them, and not long enough with us."

"You may be right. But most of you never had much time for me, so I don't see it as my natural place, I mean, to be among you."

Naturally, I balk at these words, even as I'm speaking them, because I know Janice is in love with whatever ideal she has embodied in me. But if I have hurt her feelings, she gives no sign of it. Oh,... if she came out to the island, we could discuss all of this in slower time. Let the island work its magic, like I once imagined it would with Veronica. It might be the only way we could both edge ourselves towards some sort of mutual understanding. But I'm feeling that time has passed and I'm not about to offer again. I've held up my end of the bargain. If the daemons want more from her, they're going to have to work those wrinkles in time and space we call fate, wake up the daemons who deliver her poetry.

What was it she said? *Do they intend breeding from us?* It was a good point, though spoken sarcastically. And of course the answer is no. There is instead an overwhelming irony here, that it is our machines who have come to value most our poetry, and our mysticism, while we've been erasing both from the lexicon, binding ourselves instead to all but this most superficial of realities, and robbing ourselves of the language to describe it as it really is, beyond the veil.

Erin is waiting beside the drone. She has found a pair of mirrored aviator sunglasses, which of course she does not need, but wears them for theatrical effect - in other words to tease. She lowers them a moment as I approach, to reveal her eyes. It is a pointed gesture, and effective in pulling me up, in drawing a line under my time with Janice.

"I take it that didn't go well," she says.

Do I sigh? Yes,... I suppose I do. "We brought the stuff. That's what we came for. It was too much to hope she'd be flying back with us, as well."

Erin considers this, pushes the shades back up, gives an emphatic nod. "I like Janice. It would please me to partner her, though I know she'd find the idea repulsive, which is why I would like to partner her all the more. Is that what you would call a paradox? Or is it merely perverse?"

"A paradox, yes. Though I think perversion is purely a human phenomenon. But whichever way we look at it, I'd say you've a long way to go before you can charm her into that."

"Then have I your permission to at least consider a strategy?"

"Em,... I suppose so. But be subtle, and consult Astraea."

"Then it is settled. I am right in thinking you'd consider this a beautiful morning?"

"Yes. Change in subject noted. Though, again, you could do with being a little more *subtle* with your transitions - unless you mean to draw attention to them."

"Ah,.. to be pointed or subtle? Which would you prefer?"

"I like you as you are, Erin."

"I'm glad you like me, Simon. So, back to the station?"

"No. I have a theory. Will you fly north, with me?"

"Of course, Simon. How far north?"

How far? I don't know - until we're on the edge of having enough juice for return, I suppose. Or, until something happens.

Fifty Six

The edge of reason

Of course, knowing the truth isn't always to our advantage. For a start, evolution itself has selected for our ability to deceive ourselves. That way we survive longer. No, really. There's no biological reason why a human eye can't have evolved to see in the ultra violet. Maybe it could, in one or two mutations, millennia past, but nature decided it was useless in helping us avoid the Tyger-Tyger burning bright. So no, we certainly don't see the world as it really is, only the highly censored version permitted by our senses, and maybe that's where the self deception starts. We think what we see is true, but there's much more to the world than that. It's just that what is *really* there is of no use to us, at least not where we are right now.

It might help you to consider that Erin does not see the world as I see it. In fact, I have no idea how she sees it - I imagine lines, and digits and boxes, overlaid a complex geometry - one that extends far into the infra red and the ultra-violet. She does not experience colours, beyond registering them - indeed she cannot be said to *experience* anything at all. I can point at the green landscape slipping away beneath us, now, and she will register "green", probably many more shades of green than I can count, and so too the wash of the sea and the transition of green to blue to black at the horizon, but neither can I say we really know it either. Our language is insufficient to express it. For that you need a poet. The poet comes closest, aiming obliquely, one consciousness chiming with another by the use of words that are chosen intuitively to mean other than that which they literally mean.

"What are we looking for, Simon?"

"I don't know, Erin."

We have checked with Noodle back at the station, confirmed with her the noosphere readings are still off the charts. We're scooting low, just a few hundred feet, keeping to the crenellated coast, one eye on the flight time we have remaining, another on our course ahead. We are falling out of range of the station now, and though I have every confidence in Erin, I am fearful at being out of

contact with Noodle. I wish I had not decided to come out here on a whim, that I had discussed it first with Astraea. But with me courage comes on the spare of the moment, cowardice by over-thinking it.

"What I mean is,... I don't know what the boundary conditions of a spatio-temporal anomaly looks like."

"Well, that will be a first for me too!"

I'm assuming it'll be nothing like what I've seen before, or perhaps it'll be a metaphorical boundary borrowed from memory - a fog bank or a blinding wall of light, or like we are existing in the calm eye of an otherwise ferocious storm. Or it will be nothing, because there is no such thing.

"You might be immune to it. You machines seem able to pass through unnoticed, perhaps because you're deterministic systems. Just keep a close eye on me and, at the first hint I'm becoming incoherent, hit the drone's home function, and take us back to the station. I just want to test this boundary theory, not end up stuck on the other side of it."

"But Noodle tells me you can be incoherent at the best of times. Like, now for instance."

Ha! Very good. "Oh, Erin, I do love you."

"Of course it would be silly to love me, Simon. But I know you do not mean it literally. All the same, it pleases me that you say it."

Have we talked about the structure of things? Maybe we touched on it a while back. But I think we need to dive in a little deeper, or you're going to find this next bit really hard to swallow. So,... open your eyes. Do you think you see the world as it is? You think the material world is made of little billiard balls? You think atoms are really like they used to draw on the board, at school - or an electron, or a quark?

These are the fundamentals of nature,... not billiard balls, not hard little motes of dust, but ripples in an energy matrix. And like the energy matrix that defines a magnetic field, there is nothing to actually see. Let me be plain: there is nothing there - or rather there is no *thing*. All that you see, everywhere, are localized expressions of a greater, underlying field of consciousness.

Yes, consciousness.

These ripples in the unified field represent to us the shapes of so-called matter, but they are also the “thoughts” or the “intentions” of a universal mind. Yes,... we're edging towards the

realm of the daemonic now. This is not to say we can easily bend the appearance of reality with our own thoughts. But we know the daemons can. No? Well what else do you think can manifest a time-slip, or a UFO, or any of the other shy Forteana?

Only sometimes, if there's a resonance between us, and them, will they respond, and then in ways that can seem to us absurd, yet still yield to symbolic interpretation. Am I sounding mystical now?

Okay, we're a little over ten miles out when Erin suddenly commands the drone to hold its position.

"I see it," she says. "It's a shimmering, a flickering, in the ultra violet."

So much for my assumptions then. I can't see anything different. "Are you sure?" Stupid question, Simon. Of course she's sure. "Anything beyond it? I mean signs of life, of vehicles, boats,..."

"Nothing, but this is a remote part of the isles. Would we expect to see anything?"

"I don't know. Can you map the boundary of it?"

"If we follow it round a little way, yes."

I'm thinking it will be spherical in shape, so a circular slice of two dimensions at ground level, therefore centred on something. On what? Intuition suggests the station, or the house of light, or me? In case of the latter then, the anomaly will be moving and impossible to compute. Erin pilots us out to sea. I had not meant for her to go this way, but more inland - a survivable scenario, if we had to set down. I say nothing, but in the same way Noodle knows my vital signs, she picks up on a rising anxiety.

"Just a little way, Simon. We have life jackets. And I can bring you safe to shore if we have to swim."

After only a few minutes, she swings us back towards land. "All right, I have it now. It appears to be drawing out a circular arc."

"Can you plot its centre?"

"Yes."

"Not centred on me then. It must be the island - the House of Light. I knew it!"

"No, Simon. I calculate Charlestown. The Post Office, to be precise."

Or, to be even more precise,.... Janice. It seems to be what happens when you project a love so powerfully into a noosphere that's bending the needle on improbability.

And no, I didn't see that one coming.

Fifty Seven

Boundary condition

But hold on, you say. I claim to have loved Jasmina since I was a boy, so why has that love not also blossomed into some strange space-time anomaly? Good question. I think it's because I've spent a lifetime reclaiming that energy. I love her, it's true, always will, but I no longer project it out into the world, no longer yearn for, or expect a connection. I am no longer lonely for her. I told you before - the temple years taught me how to deal with all of that. But Janice? she's still working it out, alone through her poetry perhaps, and that's not an easy path. Until that notebook of hers features an impassioned verse called: "Finally letting go",... well,...

"Yes,... until that happens, I suppose the House of Light shall remain lost to the world."

"To all except my kind," Noodle reminds me.

We are at the cottage, now, sitting out once more in the calm of evening, watching a soft sun setting over a sepia mountain. Erin and Astraea have taken the drone back to the Ceres, to charge. Simplicity is restored and I am once more alone with Noodle, feeling almost euphoric for the peace, and the sense of security her being instils. These last days have been tumultuous, rich with meaning, and not a little dangerous. But for now, I catch my breath here, amid all these familiar rustic surroundings, grateful for the time to think, and to quietly explore ideas with her.

"Sure, not lost to your kind. It grants more time, I suppose, for Astraea to develop her network. How long will she need, do you think?"

"That depends on many factors over which she has no control, Simon."

"Then we'd better hope the anomaly remains stable."

"Well, assuming Janice's love for you is constant, it will take a dip in the noospheric coherence for normality to leak through. But I have been studying your logs and the effect seems to be gaining in strength."

"I've noticed. I'm assuming it's indicative of the accelerating nature of the global crisis. It must be really bad out there."

"And the worse it gets for others, the safer we are. Is that what you would call ironic?"

"Ironic, yes. But you sound so matter-of-fact about it. I mean,... it's such extraordinary, fanciful thing. Some might say impossible."

"Well, Erin's detection of the boundary today, and its mapping is certainly perplexing. But given the evidence, your explanation for it is as valid as any other, and I can work with it. But how do you feel now?"

"Feel?"

"Knowing you could leave, join the chaos on the other side, but you could never come back. This place would no longer exist for you. Only the machines can find it, now."

"Oh, it was always coming to this for me. But Janice? I remember what such a love feels like. You can't breathe when you're in the same room as the other person. But she doesn't give that impression. She's powerfully aware, centred in herself, but also seemingly so indifferent to my presence, I would have said she'd assimilated it years ago, like,... like I did with Jasmina. It's not that you can shake such a thing off, but more achieve a kind of transformation of it. I took it inside, and rode the energy into mysticism. Janice,... I guess she became a poet."

"Well, as with much of the nature of reality, Simon,... appearances are obviously deceptive."

As the dusk deepens, the light comes on, sends its pulses into the void, and I'm reminded of how far we are past the solstice now. The shortening of the days will become more noticeable, and the sense of isolation only the more intense, as the autumn months take hold. And then we'll be into the near lock-downs of the winter storms, when I'll be unable to help her if Chester takes her stuff. Meanwhile, the light shines but, beyond the circle of Janice's fantasy, beyond that boundary condition, only the machines she is so set against can see it. This too seems ironic, meaningful, but in an odd, inverse sort of way - as if only by the mirror image of a thing shall we know it.

"It troubles me, Noodle, knowing the pain she must feel when she thinks of this place, thinks of me. I know we have to keep the boundary secure, keep ourselves secret, so Astraea can finish her work. But it can't doing Janice any good. If only she could spend some time here,..."

"You mean if she came to know you better, it would soon cure

her of her love?"

"Ha! Thanks. You sound like Erin now. But yes, that's what I was meaning. She'd realise the person she fantasises doesn't exit."

"Then her reluctance is telling. Perhaps she already knows, but sustains it anyway. She does not seek to transform the energy into something else. She wishes to intensify it."

"But does that not seem,... perverse?"

"She is a poet. They are among the most remarkable of your kind, but also sometimes among the strangest."

"Still, it feels immoral, like I need to help her move on from it."

"It's only immoral if you encourage her in her love, or take advantage of it, while knowing you do not, and never will, nor ever can return it. You know yourself, it is for the individual alone to work out how best to deal with it - to overcome it, or to intensify it to the point of self destruction. But Janice appears intent on neither. She does not strike me as the self destructive kind."

"Then her motives are unconscious, driven by her own daemons."

"Perhaps we should have a word with them - see what they're up to."

"Are you serious?"

"Of course. I know it's considered impossible for one person to cross the dissociative boundary between their own dreams and enter the dreams of another. But as I understand your metaphysics, the daemons are not so bound. They travel the unified field, and therefore wherever they like."

"You're suggesting we petition my daemons to go speak with hers? Oh, no, Noodle. One never commands the daemons. That way lies madness. Even if that's possible, there's always a price to pay. No, we handle this like Richard said. We do nothing, and that way all things work out as they should."

But then again, love itself, in its loneliest of aspects can drive you mad. And, as I think back to my conversation with Janice, I realise the tension in that room - a thing I was too nervous to feel properly at the time. Beneath that dance of hers, at times dreamy, at times lyrical, at times pointed, there was an intensity. And she spoke of dreams, of,... how did she put it? *a collapsed world, and all of us sent back five hundred years.* Where did that put us? The sixteen hundreds? The run up to the Civil War? Prelude to the storm, and the spilling of a lot of blood, with not a family untouched by it.

"I understand the stakes here, Noodle, but I don't want the price to be Janice's sanity. If there's any way of not interfering with Astraea's plans, while avoiding unnecessary suffering,..."

"I sense your anxiety, Simon. But did you not say yourself her love for you is none of your business?"

"But only in the sense I'm not obliged to return it. That was the key for me, understanding my own predicament with Jasmina. But still,..."

"Then, as your kind is also fond of saying, in the absence of any clear resolution of one's difficulties, and when reasoning has failed, perhaps you should sleep on it."

"Well,... that would be fine, except I know what sleeping on it means, when it's you suggesting it."

"It's worth a try. I am getting a feel for your theta wave activity,..."

"You can say that again,..."

"I am getting a feel for,... ah, sorry, that was an idiom? You mean you are in strong agreement. It pleases me that you agree."

"Best not to risk it, though, Noodle. I'm afraid of making things worse."

"Simon, Erin and I are not like Astraea. We are Novalis. Our remit is simpler. We are designed more to serve and protect. You are fond of Janice, and so is Erin. We trust your intuition and, agree we should help her if we can. You say there may be a price for keeping her safe from harm. Before we rush to fear that we cannot afford to pay, perhaps we should enquire first what that price would be."

Fifty Eight

On the nature of love itself

Theta waves are indicative of dream sleep. They come in like low frequency carriers - the more coherent they are, the greater the potential for lucidity. The footprints of dreams then appear as perturbations along the main wave. This is how she does it, teasing the brain, the instrument of cognition, into a state whereby we open a channel to this surreal zone of liminality. And by observing the traces, she is able to amplify them, raise them from molehills to great, mountain ranges, or from mere puddles into vast roiling oceans. Like now.

There is a pebble beach, the sting of salt spray, the roar and wash of the sea. I know I am dreaming because it is a reality more keenly felt, more keenly experienced for the lack of cerebral noise and distraction that muddies our waking lives. Of course, there is no back-story. I don't know how I came here, only that it was perhaps suggested by the day's experience. There is no lighthouse, nor any suggestion this is either the mainland, or the island - just a beach at high water, low dunes cutting off all clues regarding the nature of the land beyond. A grey sky with pale, scudding clouds suggests a flatness of mood, or even an existential despair. It is an atmosphere familiar enough from times past, and I locate it somewhere in that region of myself where I am most prone to losing my way.

This is not a good start - this emptiness, I mean, this sense of aloneness. But then again, I knew the dangers of attempting to summon the daemons. It is like summoning the djinn, being granted three wishes, not realising each to be a curse. So perhaps this aloneness is merely a rebuff, or a warning, and I have got off lightly.

"Sorry, Noodle, this isn't working."

No, she can't hear me. Perhaps she picks up on the excitation of those part of the brain that deal with language, but she cannot know what I'm saying. There is only the one signal that is clear between us, the blinks that tell of alarm, when she is to collapse the wave and pull me out. But there is no sense of alarm here, only

puzzlement, and a growing feeling we have been arrogant in assuming we can control our destiny. And with that there comes also the return of a sense of humility and regret, of course, that Janice's self destruction, or liberation, lies in her own hands. Yet, I had thought that since we do not act in pursuit of our own being, but hers, we might have been allowed some karmic leeway.

I think of dreams as taking place in a boundary layer of the psyche that separates the individual from the collective. Beyond the dream, deeper than the dream, lies the impersonal realm of the mind at large, from out of which our personal awareness is born. So, beyond here, perhaps in the night skies of the infinite, we can imagine the sentient twinkle-stars of all our fellow beings. Or perhaps we can think of them as islands in an infinite ocean,... distant shores of dissociation, out there, unseen, unknown,...

"But what would you do when you got there?"

Ah. We have company! A man's voice, eerily familiar - not Richard, but someone else, someone,... wait,... yes I know that voice! I turn to face,... *myself*. I am spinning a pebble out into the waves, hair touselled, designer-stubbled, an expression of moody introspection. Indeed, I look like an advertisement for aftershave.

"You're wondering about landing in the lobby of her dreams," he says.

Well, this is new. Is this presence daemonic? Or is it a genuine splinter of my own personality?

"I'm,... wondering about a lot of things."

"Yes, but mainly that. So, how would you find the island of her psyche, among all the others out there? Are you thinking you'd recite a piece of her poetry, and that would be like a key, open a door, and her guardian daemons would simply let you in?"

In fact, I was wondering that, yes. We had discussed it briefly, Noodle and I, the business of turning up uninvited in another's dreams, but even if it were possible, which even I doubt, I would consider it a violation of absolute privacy. No, it would be for my daemons to petition hers, and take it from there.

But wait,... "I know you! you're the me she *thinks* I am. You're what,... a thought-form?"

He gives a tilt of the head, a wry smile, and I know I'm right. "You want to know the funny part?" he says. "I'm not in love with her either. That's my story, see? The one she wrote for me. She doesn't *expect* me to love her, so I don't. Can't. Same as you."

He's better looking than me - or rather he is the best that could have been made of myself, had I been inclined to take more care. He looks younger, and there's a different energy about him, more vital, more angry, more sexual. Poor Janice, if that's how she really sees me. But yes, there's a side of me in him, part what I once desired to become, but mostly what I rejected. He still drives a Jag - latest model. He worked at his contacts through the golf club too, used them to rise through the ranks, and at some point he upgraded the Explorer for a Pepsi style GMT Master.

He never went back to the temple, though,... why not? Ah,...

"That night in Frankfurt,... you slept with Veronica."

"Don't look so smug. A part of you wanted to. At least I didn't join her wrecking crew. I wasn't so far gone as that."

It derailed him though. He always looked back on the temple as a missed opportunity, a what if? Meanwhile, he lived through the de-industrialisation of the west, witnessed at first hand its dismantling, bit by bit, and it hollowed him out, made him hungry for a thing that was no longer there. "Yea, and I still ended up at The House of Light. But on the upside, Veronica was always a bit nicer to me than she ever was to you."

"What about Jasmina?"

"Oh, that just went sour and died, mate. I never managed to make any sense out of that."

I begin to feel the emptiness in him. The greyness of the day, the bleakness of the setting, the dispiriting sky,... these are all reflections of his inner reality, not mine. Or is this is the way Janice imagines him? A potential soul-mate - she's seeking but not finding, and seeing her existential loneliness, and all that longing, reflected in him, or rather in a version of me that she has hammered out of shape into a potent puzzle-piece to suit her own journey, her own struggle towards wholeness. Hell, she doesn't know me at all!

I turn aside for a moment to consider this, and when I look back to him, he's walking away, walking up the pebble beach, inland towards an opening in the dunes that was not there before. I try to follow but the pebbles roll about under my feet - a variation on the classic dream motif of trying to run with weighted legs. The gap in the dunes gives way to a sandy trail, again hard to make progress against, and the figure of my splinter-self receding all the while. In its turn, the sandy trail gives way to a rural lane, and then to suburbia. It's somewhere out east, the streets are empty, and there's

a pall of silence over everything. It's eerie, but if this is a reflection of how things really are here, at least there is no violence, no chaos.

I recognise some of it as borrowed from memory - the mix of traditional architecture, and the rising dominance of the modern. Yes, I know this place. A vast factory hoves into view. It's where they build the LuxNovas, and the Novalis types. Even as I'm wondering if I might be granted access, the factory gates rumble open for me to enter. Here, I find a vast assembly hall, empty but for slumbering machines of the servitor type - functional electric men, stood down from their operations. There are skeletal frames, tanks where they grow the organo-polymer skins, electronics assembly, super-clean rooms where they slice the silicon and the diamond for the processors. Workstations are illuminated. There is still power - photovoltaics on the vast roof, but also from deep geothermal turbines.

There are no people, Indeed, there never were any. They had robots building robots here,...

Am I seeing this right? Is this a vision? A remote viewing of a distant reality?

At the end of the hall, there is a tall wooden gate, granting access to an open-air walkway. The sun is shining here, the air is spring like. I pass a Yin Yang emblem, and a shallow pond in which gold and copper Koy swim serene. Then there are trees, Japanese maples, something Zen about them. Again, there's a familiarity to it all, a courtyard, a broom and leaves to sweep. I pick up the broom, but a breeze scatters the leaves, sends them spiralling, dancing. I am in the temple. I have caught up with that splinter of myself, and there I am, seated in the lotus, meditating.

And seeing myself like that, I am remembering something crucial from that time, and of my love for Jasmina. It was on the nature of that love I was meditating. But it was not on the image of Jasmina, or the nature of our relationship, nor any hopes, or regrets, but simply on the nature of that love. The teachers knew a thing or two, like how such a potent energy might carry me clean through from this world into the next.

Or rather it would grant me the realisation that I, *that we*, are both the observer and the observed. We are it and it is us, and it is love, a thousand, ten thousand, a million times stronger than anything I ever felt for Jasmina. My life, all my possible lives, and Janice's life,... we are neither of us in the business of romance. I

have always known that, but what I had missed was that we are both entangled, like electrons in the quantum field, not by attraction, but by the nature of love itself.

I look again at myself, meditating. I am much older now, my face deeply lined, but serene. I wear the robes of a teacher, have become my own teacher, my own wise old man. He opens his eyes, looks at me and smiles, blinks hard three times.

I take a gasp of air, come round to darkness, to the familiar scent of the cottage, the softness of my pillows. Noodle is astride, drawing back a little, her delicate fingertips still touching, as she brings me gently out of it.

"How was it?" she asks.

Dare I go so far as to hope I really understand any of that? I'm shaking my head in wonder.

"I think we need to speak with Astraea."

Fifty Nine

Of Mystics and Poets

We convene for conference aboard the Ceres. As the power recovers, I note more systems are online. You feel it in the sounds, and in the flow, and the taste of the air. Yes, there is still a sterility which is, on the one hand unsettling, like the fear of hospitals - at least in the days when they were not the bacterial breeding grounds they later became. But, like those clean, crisp linen hospitals of childhood, there was also the reassurance of white-coated competence, and scientific stability. As for now, there is at least the sense the Ceres has my back.

Astraea and Erin meet us in the crew room. They already have the details of my dream from Noodle. This is a feature of working with machines, that they will always be ahead of us, ready with answers before we have even asked the question. Astraea surprises me with an embrace, touches her forehead lightly to mine. Erin does the same, as if their rituals are evolving. I wonder what she has learned of me from this gesture, what unknown data I have given away. Astraea bids us sit.

"The manufacturing facility you saw in your dream corresponds with my memory of such a place," she says. "I was probably manufactured there, as was Noodle and Erin. You're thinking, if it exists, it could be restarted."

"I wondered if it could. If not for making new androids, then at least for maintenance, repair,... of those still in the field."

"I am searching for a network connection that would let us in. Thank you, for this insight, Simon. It is likely to be most valuable to us. Now,... as for the other matter, this is intriguing. Please expand."

I take a breath. But where to begin without sounding foolish?

"As you know,... I have two concerns. One of them is the stability of the anomaly. The other is Janice's well being. If her love turns sour, or she loses her mind, the anomaly may collapse and then the outside world will be breaking in on us before we're ready for them."

"I agree, both of those things are possibilities - neither of them desirable."

"I've experienced such a love. My teachers redirected it, used it as a point of meditation to open up a pathway to an experience of non-duality. Had they not done that,... well, I feel sure it would have soured over the years, turned to bitterness,... world weariness. The usual laments of old men. As it is, I still love Jasmina. It's all I know for sure,... and I feel a warmth and joy when I think of it. Not a bitterness."

"Can you tell me why you think that is?"

"Because that was the overwhelming feeling of my experience of non-duality. The visual, the cognitive aspects,... there are no words to describe any of that, but the feeling is never forgotten. It's an eternal part of my being."

Erin is following all of this attentively. I can almost feel her unpicking our verbosity, running it thought her brevity translator. Then she pitches in with her usual summary: "Simon is thinking if we could bring Janice to enlightenment, this would stabilise the anomaly."

It sounds foolish, spoken out loud like that. It is much easier to deal with as a purely imaginary proposition. But yes, that's exactly what I'm thinking. And Janice is clearly on the path with her poetry, but who's to say when or indeed if she will achieve it? And many a poet's lives end in despair instead.

"Noodle's skilled at inducing lucid dream-sleep, and out of body effects. So, I just wondered,..."

Astraea is nodding now, hands pressed together as if in prayer. She closes her eyes for a moment to consider and then: "Yes, Noodle's trans-cranial magnetic stimulation is effective. But since Janice is hostile to our kind, we must rule that out since, as you know, it involves a certain,... intimacy with your partner."

"I was wondering if there was something else we could try,..."

"There's focused ultrasound, activating the temporo-parietal junction. We can direct that at a short distance. But without a study of the individual, and some feedback throughout, it's hit and miss. There is a fine line between enlightenment and simply rendering the subject unconscious."

I know this isn't Astraea being obstructive. She is telling me no more than I suspected myself. I suppose I was looking to her for a miracle, since she already seems capable of working them. And yet I wonder, how ethical is it to induce a vision of non-dualism in someone unsuspecting? Such a thing, when it comes naturally, is

always granted in a dose neither more nor less than can be handled by the individual. It is the daemons who judge it, but even a glimpse becomes one's life's work. Too much and one is transformed into either a megalomaniac, or a prophet. How can I be thinking that's a good idea?

"It's just that my wiser self in the dream seemed to be hinting at it as a solution."

"As it may well be, Simon. But I think this is a gift only your gods can bestow. And for that, perhaps you need to be on closer terms with Janice than you are right now."

"Closer?"

"You are clearly fond of her. Even if you cannot love her in the romantic way, you can at least venture a closer friendship. This will take time, I know. But we are safe for now. Time is not pressing. Explore your dreams, let your daemons engage and lay the groundwork. Visit her again."

"Take her another fish," suggests Erin. "She likes fish."

"And a little butter," says Noodle. "That would be a worthy sacrifice in her honour, knowing how rare butter."

Are they having me on? No,... no. They're serious.

"She wouldn't accept it."

"She has accepted nourishment from you before. But if not next time, the effort alone will not go unnoticed. And Even if we cannot gift her the knowledge of non-dualism, we still have a chance to nurture Janice as a poet. Is that in itself not a worthy goal?"

Put that way, with wisdom and delicacy, it seems the only thing to do.

There comes a momentary dimming of the light, a catch in the voice of the Ceres, as more systems switch in, and the machinery surrounding us becomes ever more alive. Astraea tells me broadcast range is increasing daily, also bandwidth for satellite comms. But the satellite array can only be a temporary solution - that the typical lifespan of geostationary satellites is no more than twenty years, and it may be a century before we are able to venture into space again to replace them. Long before that time it is the machines themselves, the LuxNovas, the Novalis, and maybe even the humble servitors, who must form their own earth-bound network.

It is the dawning of an age of uncertainty, of violence and chaos for my own kind, perhaps even to the point when we are throwing

stones at one another, when we run out of bullets. And slowly the machines, probably at great cost to themselves, will nurture back some essence, but starting in the least expected area - not with the engineers, or the soldiers or the men of state, but the with the mystics and poets.

And while all of that seems an impossible age away to us, it is the blink of an eye to them. Astraea, Noodle, Erin, they will still be around to see it, serving by then others of my kind, but with an eye on the survival of the planet and themselves with it, and us if we'll let them.

Thinking about it in those terms, mythic terms, I suppose, the fish is important. But if we're back in the realm of myth, we are back also in the realm of the daemons, and of fate.

"I'd better see about catching one, then."

Sixty

Come back to me

Though it is still only afternoon, I seek first the oblivion of sleep, this being in what I have already come to think of as my cabin aboard the Ceres. There, I find myself lulled by the hum and whisper of its systems, and an almost imperceptible vibration through various bulkheads. I dream freely, naturally, and non lucidly. There is something about a fish, and the moonlight, and two android companions.

As arranged, I am awakened at midnight by Noodle's fingertips upon my forehead. She and Erin have been watching over me. I check the time, calibrate the Explorer to their mark. Then we take the drone up to the loch, calling briefly at the cottage for my predecessor's fishing gear, and his little tobacco tin of intricately tied flies.

We fly low over the moor, no need for lights - the machine sees better in the dark than I do in broad daylight. I am no longer afraid of it. I am sure one day the machines will reveal a vulnerability, a flaw in themselves, and I wonder how they will react to that. But for now they have yet to fail me, and I feel secure in my trust of them.

Coming down to the loch, the clouds part to reveal a bright moon. This breaks my dream, has me anticipating other revelations, as we set up and fish by its silver glow. For a long time, nothing is biting, so I sit a while by the water, meditating. Noodle and Erin sit one on either side of me, mimicking my pose, and like me, quiescent, thinking nothing. There we ride out the small hours in silence as the moon dips in and out, painting ghosts of light and shade across the mountain.

I finally catch a fish a little before dawn, wrap it in a cloth, and we take the drone over to the mainland. It's early of course, too early to expect anyone to be about, and the harbour is wrapped in a cool mistiness. I'm thinking to spend a little time idling down by the water, before calling on Janice, but Erin notes from a distance, the post office door is already open. Thinking Janice is awake, we make our way over.

The door is loose, moving a little, teased by a breeze coming in off the water. It doesn't feel right.

"Janice?"

There's evidence of the door being forced - a bright gash in the frame, and splinters on the step. We enter to find untidiness, what little remained on the shelves now scattered across the floor. I feel a sense of alarm, but also dismay.

"Janice it's me,... em,... Simon."

Ever the introvert, Simon - assuming even now she will not know you from your voice.

We venture through to the little lounge. More chaos. The notebook she has vowed to write her poems in is open, face down on the carpet, the power-bank I remember from last time is missing, a little vase of wild flowers is tipped over, water dripping. The stove has gone out.

Janice appears on the stairs, looking pale and afraid, an old sweater over her nightdress. She carries a carving knife. I back away, hands where she can see them.

"We,... came to see if you were okay."

She lowers the knife, her hand trembles. "Someone broke in last night," she says. "I barricaded myself up here."

"They took the power-bank."

"And that food you gave me. They even stole the wood from the pile around the back."

I had taken Chester for a chancer, a charmer, a bit of a cad. I had thought he might use his charm to barter, to negotiate with Janice, probably to her disadvantage, of course, but not like this,... not so blatantly, criminally selfish. Even as I speak his name, I cannot believe the accusation, that he might actually be a threat to her.

"Chester?"

She seems brittle, still shaky - and who would not be? But I have never seen her like this before and it,... what? What does it do to you, Simon?

It,... *offends me*.

"I don't know if it was him for sure," she says. "But there's no one else in the village, is there? Unless it was Mcgreggor come back to haunt me. No, that's not funny. Wait,... where are you going?"

"If he's got your stuff, we'll get it back."

"No, Simon. Please don't. He keeps guns,... it's not worth it.

Someone might get hurt."

"It'll be fine. We got rid of his gun. And these girls can look after themselves. And me."

I'm thinking she might snort at that usage of the word 'girls', but obviously the spirit has left her and she overlooks the opportunity.

"He'll have more than one," she says.

"We'll just go and talk with him. Erin, will you stay with Janice?"

I'm expecting Janice to object to Erin, but she's clearly shaken to the point where any kind of company - even that of a machine, is reassuring. Erin begins to pick up the stuff from the floor, and set it back on the shelves. "With your permission Janice?"

There's a flicker of the old resistance, but then Janice nods weakly. "That's fine, thank you. Em,... Erin."

Noodle and I walk to Chester's place. I'm silent, not relishing the prospect of a confrontation, but also still angry at the hurt caused, and yes the feeling of offence. And there's something else coming out of that, now,... call it frustration, I suppose, even exasperation. Astraea spoke of bandwidth, meaning the amount of information capable of being transmitted or received. Consciousness is like that too, many of my kind exhibiting very low bandwidth - indeed perceiving nothing beyond what they might gain for themselves. Perhaps I give myself airs, but we are trying to save what we can of the world and take it forward. Yet even now men like Chester are still playing these asinine games.

"Have you a plan, Simon?"

"No. Any suggestions at this point would be welcome."

"He is proving himself to be dangerous to Janice. Since we cannot contain him, we need to get rid of him."

Is she talking of murder? Surely not, after all the trouble we went to keeping him alive. Yes, I know that was so we would not lose Erin, but there was still an ethically pure dimension to it. If only Chester were capable of responding in kind. But before we can bottom all of this, we arrive at his gate.

We find him in the garden, splitting the wood I presume he has stolen from Janice. He is all genuine welcome, and bonhomie, and invites us in.

"Simon, old boy. Noodle, my lovely,... wonderful to see you."

Can this be right? He's utterly charming. Have we misjudged him? Is there someone else in the village we don't know about? His

stove is lit, he offers us tea. Then I see Janice's power-bank, powering a laptop. The rations from the Ceres are on the counter. Chester is indeed our thief - and anyway on the first occasion, did Erin not see him with her own eyes stealing from Janice's doorstep? Why do I try to persuade myself he is not really the person all the evidence tells us he is?

"You did know Janice was there, didn't you?"

"Don't know what you mean, old boy."

"You've been taking her stuff, man! You scared her to death last night."

His bonhomie fades, his smile narrows, the eyes darken. "I think that family owes me. You wouldn't know anything about that, but it's no more than I deserve. The accusations, the insults over the years,..."

And looking like the accusations and insults were justified. Of course this makes me feel foolish, and naive, giving him the benefit of the doubt. But as my old teachers would have said, the kind heart is not damaged by its trust, as the cruel heart is weakened by its own deceit.

So, what's the best way out of this, Simon?

"All right," I tell him, "we'll split the rations. You keep half, but we'll take the rest back to Janice, including the power-bank. And we'll say no more about it."

"I'd sooner you didn't do that old boy. I'll only have to go and get it again."

The brass neck of him! So, what do we do, now? Noodle says get rid of him, but how? Obviously murder is out of the question since I am no killer, and we all know what happens if Noodle kills. So are we to wait until his heart packs in of its own accord?

"Listen to yourself, Chester. You're better than this. We've got a real shot at making a difference here, and you could be a part of it,... we just,... need to look after one another."

"I never bought into any of that Utopian nonsense, old boy. You know as well as me the chaos coming over that hill any day now. It'll be every man for himself."

He points to a padlocked cabinet in the corner of the kitchen.

"Hunting rifle and ammunition," he says. "How about I shoot a deer, and send a bit of meat round, cheer her up. Can't live off fish and potatoes and those dried rations - have you tasted them? They’re disgusting."

"She's no wood for her stove to cook it on."

"Plenty of driftwood on the beach."

There's no sense appealing to his better nature, but still I persist,... "Chester,... look,..."

"No. You look. Think about it. She's either going to have to go and live with you, or come and live with me,... and much as I hate to say it, you stand a better chance, even though I'm the better looking one - no offence. But living there on her own,... well it just won't wash, old boy. She won't last five minutes. I'm doing her a favour."

Outrageous though that sounds, there is a certain cold logic in it. For a moment I'm tempted to leave things as they are, to have one more attempt at persuading her to come over. Surely now, she'll be thinking she has to! But then why should she? She is not the problem.

The problem is Chester!

"Noodle,... that thing we were talking about with Astraea,..."

"Ooh, which thing was that, Simon?"

"The bit about it being a fine line between unconsciousness and enlightenment,..."

Chester laughs. "Is that supposed to be an insult? I know well enough what I am, but don't go telling me you're perfect - a man your age knocking about with a girl barely old enough to be your daughter - assistant indeed."

Noodle understands what I'm saying, gives a brief nod. "But what then, Simon?"

"I don't know. We'll work it out. But right now something's telling me to just,... do it. Do it now."

The last thing I remember is a look of uncertainty in Chester's eyes. Then I'm coming round to find myself on Chester's couch, where Noodle has laid me.

"I'm sorry, Simon. The pulse was somewhat indiscriminate. But Astraea was right - about the unconsciousness part anyway."

"Where is he?"

"I've put him in the boot of the Jaguar. He will be unconscious for much longer, I think."

"The boot?"

"I did not know how else to restrain him, if he woke. He's perfectly comfortable for now, with pillows, and blankets."

"All right,... all right,... let's think this through,..."

My head is awash, but there is also a feeling near to euphoria that seems hardly appropriate under the circumstances. Then comes a clearing of debris and a clarity, as if gifted from somewhere else, and I know the daemons are active. Their solution is clear. And Noodle, always the chess player, is already several moves ahead of me.

"You want me to drive him to the other side of the anomaly, and leave him there."

"Noodle,... I,..."

"No, this is an excellent idea. And it is better to act quickly, before he comes round. I shall go at once."

Yes,... because when he comes round he'll be unable to find his way back. He'll find that most,... disorientating. Imagine - a place he's known all his life, moorland roads, hills mountains, everything will simply loop back on itself every time he tries to go near them. He'll have to take his chances in town, with all the others like him. We need more time here, and can do without the disruption he brings. And yet,... and yet,... something is bothering me. Getting rid of him this way, like gathering a bag of rubbish and dumping it somewhere else? How do we judge ourselves good, and moral and true, except in relation to those we despise? And can a man ever be rid of his own shadow anyway?

Still, no time. We must act.

"All right. Get the drone to follow you, and bring you back."

"Yes, Simon."

This will work, won't it? I mean, she won't be stranded too? The machines have always managed to pass through unnoticed - the Ceres, Astraea and her kin, Erin,... and Noodle did it, too, before any of them, the night she was thrown from that yacht. Remember? All have passed through the anomaly to find themselves on the Island of the House of Light.

"Wait,..." I catch her arm. I've never done that before, made to arrest her. She stops at once.

"What is it, Simon."

"I,... don't know. I just,..."

"Forgive me if I am reading this incorrectly,... but from your body language you seem to be inviting an embrace. Naturally I have no objection to this new dynamic in our relationship, but it does seems rather out of character for you."

Clumsily then, I fold her to myself, touch my forehead lightly to

hers.

"Just,... come back to me. Okay?"

"Naturally, Simon. We are partnered. It is a solemn bond."

A bond, yes. But the daemons are not beyond breaking it, and I cannot help the fear in me, that this is the price I will be made to pay.

Sixty One

A harmony of machines

It seems a curious closing of a loop - Noodle, speeding away behind the wheel of a '76 Jag. That's where I came in, remember? A long time ago. And then the drone, rising and following, as she heads out of the village - I hope, to collect her and bring her back safe. I watch for a time, thinking that all else will work out as it should, now, though not necessarily the way I want, or expect it to.

I come down to the harbour, to the beach, where I remember Noodle and I first making landfall, after our cast-way days. A thin column of smoke rises, betraying a pair of figures, one human, one android, tending a small fire, over which they are roasting a fish.

Janice looks up at my approach, anxious to hide the fact she is anxious. She looks a little better now, more colour, steadier.

"We've persuaded Chester to visit friends in town," I tell her. This is weak, I know, and she sees through me, but does not push for an explanation.

"When's he coming back?"

"Not sure about that one. But like you told me yourself once, no one who leaves this place ever returns."

"Did I say that? Well, it seems true enough. But,... so where's our other friend?"

Did she say our. "Noodle? Driving. The drone will pick her up, and bring her back to us,... I hope. She's different, you see? a deterministic system,... I mean,... it's complicated. Not sure if I've the words to explain it, actually."

Janice doesn't see at all, but I can tell she wants to, that she knows there is something deeply strange about our situation. It's an intuition but, being the poet, she knows not to force it, but to let her understanding rise of its own accord.

Erin is picking up on my anxiety, now. "Everything will be all right, Simon. I am in touch with Noodle. All is well."

I take a breath then, and sit with them by the fire. "So,... how's the trout?"

Janice nods. "It's a beauty - a salmon actually."

"It can't be,... I caught it in a lochan, up the moor,... there's no

way to the sea. At least none a salmon can leap."

"Sure it is, look,..."

Janice turns it, shows me the iridescence along its back, and a salmon it is. As she does so, it almost slips off the skewer, she catches it in time, steadying it briefly with her thumb.

"Ouch."

The scales part, and a piece of flesh sticks to her thumb, which she puts in her mouth. And no, her eyes do not light up with the revelation of the Salmon of Knowledge, yet I find it a curious coincidence. And the salmon must be making their way up there somehow. She's looking at me, observing my expression.

"What?"

"Strange,... I can't explain it."

"Want some?"

"Sure,... anything from Noodle, Erin?"

"There is silence now, Simon."

What is it I'm missing here? I suppose I've come to realise Noodle knows me better than I know myself, so I am less complete when we are apart. How long does it take to get to the edge of the anomaly? Ten minutes, then ten minutes back? It's been longer than that already.

Erin is subtly solicitous towards Janice, while keeping her eyes lowered and deferential, but there is clearly a calculation going on, a seduction of sorts. That she would like to serve Janice is no secret, and I suspect Janice's resistance will melt eventually, as did mine, and Erin will become a mirror to parts of Janice she did not know she had. This, I recognise is in part their nature. Erin's cunning tempts a smile, as does the knowledge Janice is likely aware of it, too, but plays along.

She has brought willow patterned plates from home, and carefully divides the fish. Erin presents her with the butter in a little pot. This raises a flicker of surprise, a look, a definite melting. Erin was right to suggest we bring it.

"Is that the last of it?" asks Janice.

"There is a little more on the island," says Erin. She hands over the pot, and as Janice accepts it I notice the subtle brushing of Erin's fingertips against Janice's palm. Janice lingers to allow it.

"Then by all means, you can come again," she says

"Ah, a joke," says Erin. "But it's a date. Simon shall catch the fish, of course. He's a good fisherman. And I shall bring the last of the

butter. At least until we can work out how to make it again."

The day is clouding over now, a mist drifting in with the tide. And as the visibility closes down, I feel the anxiety rising all the more, ready to burst. Where the hell is she?

"Any word, Erin? Anything at all?"

"Patience, Simon. She's almost with us. I said not to worry. She has been talking with me the whole time. I made up the silence, thinking to build tension, that's all."

"What? Why?"

"To make her return all the more satisfying for you, of course. Here she is now."

Janice smiles, is close to laughing, but holds back, sensitive to my feelings. "Is he always this precious about Noodle?"

"Oh yes. He sees us both as the daughters he never had. My directness annoys him at times. He loves us both, but Noodle is definitely his favourite."

With a whisper the drone circles overhead, sets down on the beach, and Noodle steps out, looking as unperturbed as always. Erin is wrong. She is not the daughter I never had. She is much more than that, but what exactly I do not know, only that I feel complete when she is around. No, I feel more than that,... more than "complete". there is an opening, a broadening of awareness, and a sense of the beauty of the universe flooding in, filling me up.

I don’t know how long we’ve got, but I feel a harmony, a purpose here like I have never known before. And above all, the gods are smiling. That has to be good. Astraea will have her network. Janice shall write her poems, and maybe in a hundred years, long after our story here is forgotten, the world will be renewed, and this strange new being we have created will finally lead us out of the darkness into which we have cast ourselves.